ON AISHA & AFGHAN WOMEN • ANN JONES

# THE Nation.

DOUBLE ISSUE

# DEBATING OBAMA

A FORUM FEATURING
ERIC ALTERMAN
WITH
MICHAEL KAZIN
SALIM MUWAKKIL
NORMAN ORNSTEIN
THEDA SKOCPOL
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PLUS:
E.L. DOCTOROW ON
OUR CULTURAL
MOMENT

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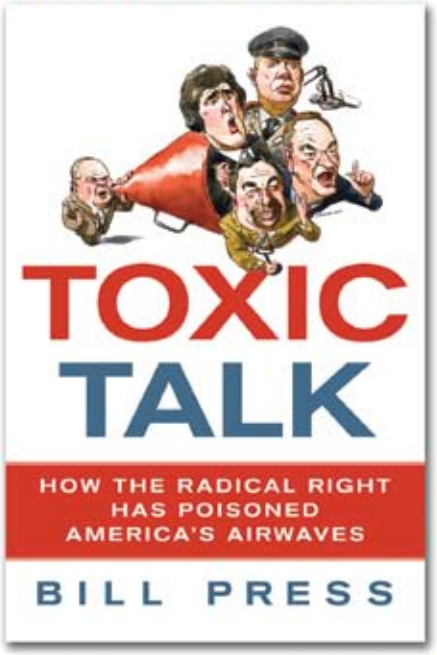


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# Letters

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AMY TRAUB
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MAX FRASER
IS THIS THE END OF THE WAR ON CRIME?
SASHA ABRAMSKY

## So, SEIU Me

New York City

Three years ago, very few people anticipated the complete and worldwide collapse of the economy. Our nation lost $17 trillion, a quarter of its wealth, virtually overnight. Every industrialized nation is now faced with impossible choices and deep cuts that slice right to the heart of the hard-won gains, both tangible and social, that progressives and trade unionists have fought for.

Max Fraser, in his provocative article "The SEIU Andy Stern Leaves Behind" [July 5], asks many of the right questions but ultimately misses a key point: over the past fifteen years, SEIU accomplished something extraordinary. At a time when the American labor movement was shrinking, SEIU united more than 1.2 million workers in the union, doubling its size and the ability of those workers to make real and, one hopes, lasting gains on the job.

Fraser's critique really speaks to the heart of what all working people face as a threat: the collapse of the social welfare system and the failure of capitalism to protect the fundamental security of those who work for a living. And that's why SEIU's executive board spent three days recently addressing the crisis that workers face right now and planning forward.

We know that we cannot go it alone, because for all our union's progress in organizing and in politics, today we see the economic crisis destroying not only our jobs and our communities but also the standards we have worked so hard to achieve. Our decisions:

§ SEIU will continue working with partners in the labor, progressive and religious communities to march with workers through the streets to the doorsteps of very big banks that have been bad actors and have brought about this economic collapse.

§ SEIU will challenge the CEOs, politicians and even Democratic lobbyists who are helping those deemed "too big to fail" to continue to fail us.

§ SEIU will keep standing, marching and getting arrested with our coalition partners seeking justice for immigrants while at the same time we end the shadow economy that allows unscrupulous business owners to profit at the expense of all workers.

§ SEIU will participate in the global efforts to hold multinational corporations like Sodexo accountable for how they treat the women and men who work for them.

§ And SEIU will continue to fight day and night to see that workers—both in unions and not—are not forced to bear the burden of recovery alone.

There is no question that working people would be in much better shape if more workers were in unions, and we will continue our efforts to make sure that all workers who want a voice on the job are able to unite. The easy part is recognizing the obvious: none of us have solved the problem that working people face each and every day. The challenge for us all is not just to imagine but also to realize a future that restores our economy and rewards work.

Gerry Hudson, *executive vice president Service Employees International Union*

## Fraser Replies

New York City

I thank Gerry Hudson for his thoughtful letter and agree with much of what he says about the challenges facing SEIU, the labor movement and working people in today's economy. He is right to note the important work SEIU has done over the past fifteen years to expand its membership while empowering workers in and out of unions. SEIU's accomplishments in both cases have been considerable, and the goals Hudson lays out for the years ahead are ambitious and inspiring.

But my article does not question this aspect of SEIU's recent history; nor does it imply that SEIU has not embraced a progressive political agenda that has put it at the forefront of today's struggles for civil rights, comprehensive immigration reform, financial regulation and the like. Rather, it should

(continued on page 30)

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# No Relief in Sight

How bad is it out there? Even a cursory scan of the news paints a grim picture of an America on the brink: broken roads, crumbling bridges, dimmed streetlights, shuttered clinics and scrapped school programs. Everywhere one turns, the nation's basic infrastructure—built in the twentieth century to connect communities and care for the sick, the young and the old—is being abandoned, as if there were not enough workers to keep it up. Yet the exact opposite is true: more than one in ten Americans are out of work, and more than half of those have been unemployed for more than six months.

EDITORIAL

Even the normally inflation-obsessed Fed, worried that the economy is headed into a deflationary spiral, bought billions in Treasury securities to keep money flowing through the financial system. But monetary policy can only do so much. The short-term solution to the crisis is obvious: get cash pumping through states and cities to create and preserve jobs. So too are the obstacles: a breathtakingly cynical GOP hellbent on opposing anything that might improve the economy—in the hopes that voters will blame Democrats in November—and an ill-timed, baseless bipartisan hysteria over deficits.

There is no clearer sign of the poisonous environment created by these factions than the battle to pass a $26 billion package to help states and local governments make Medicaid payments and avoid laying off 140,000 teachers. The only way Senate majority leader Harry Reid was able to break a Republican filibuster was with offsets, largely through—if you can believe it—$12 billion in cuts to food stamps. Reid had to table his initial proposal to cut "only" $6.7 billion in food stamps because the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) said the bill would still add $4.9 billion to the deficit. Only by nearly doubling the food stamp cut were Democrats able to win the votes of Republican Senators Olympia Snowe and Susan Collins.

The political calculus is stunning. More than $1 trillion for the banks? No problem. But $10 billion for teachers and $16 billion to help the poor get healthcare? Only if it's deficit-neutral and offset by other cuts to social spending. Never mind that many people using food stamps are already living through a depression or that food stamps are one of the most reliable ways to stimulate spending. The food stamp lobby doesn't have quite the same pull as the Chamber of Commerce or US corporations—which have seen their profits rise by 36 percent this year and enjoy profit margins as a share of GDP that are near postwar records.

With this kind of downsized politics, many good proposals are left foundering. Take the infrastructure bank proposed by Michael Lind and Sherle Schwenninger of the New America Foundation and championed by Congresswoman Rosa DeLauro. By investing private and public funds in America's roads, rails, electrical grid and telecommunications systems, an infrastructure bank would create the jobs Americans so desperately need; as *Washington Post* columnist Harold Meyerson points out, infrastructure is "the investment with the highest multiplier effect." It's also the first move in restructuring the economy so that it's more stable and productive and less at the mercy of financial bubbles and busts. This kind of long-term rewiring will also require more progressive taxation to reduce gilded-age inequality and strengthen labor protections for workers. But when the CBO, centrist deficit hawks and obstinate Republicans call the shots, it seems the chances for good proposals like these are slim to none.

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# Our Afghan Demons

I know Bibi Aisha, the young Afghan woman pictured on the August 9 cover of *Time*, and I rejoice that her mutilated nose and ears are going to be surgically repaired. But the logic of those who use Aisha's story to convince us that the US military must stay in Afghanistan escapes me. Even Aisha has already left for America.

COMMENT

I realize that last remark has no logical basis, but then neither does the *Time* cover line "What Happens if We Leave Afghanistan" beside a shocking photo depicting what happened (to this woman) after we had already stayed for eight years. I heard Aisha's story from her a few weeks before the image of her face was displayed all over the world. She told me that her father-in-law caught up with her after she ran away, and took a knife to her on his own; village elders later approved, but the Taliban didn't figure at all in this account. The *Time* story, however, attributes Aisha's mutilation to a husband under orders of a Talib commander, thereby transforming a personal story, similar to those of countless women in Afghanistan today, into a portent of things to come for all women if the Taliban return to power. Profoundly traumatized, Aisha might well muddle her story, but what excuses reporters who seem to inflate the role of the Taliban with every repetition of the case? Some reports have Aisha "sentenced" by a whole Taliban "jirga."

The Taliban do terrible things. Yet the problem with demonizing them is that it diverts attention away from other, equally unpleasant and threatening facts. Let's not make the common mistake of thinking that the devil we see is the only one.

Consider the creeping Talibanization of Afghan life under the Karzai government. Restrictions on women's freedom of movement, access to work and rights within the family have steadily tightened as the result of a confluence of factors, including the neglect of legal and judicial reform and the obligations of international human rights conventions; legislation typified by the infamous Shia Personal Status Law (SPSL), gazetted in 2009 by President Karzai himself despite women's protests and international furor; intimidation; and violence. Women legislators told the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) last year that they have come to fear the fundamentalist warlords who control the Parliament. One said, "Most of the time women don't dare even say a word about sensitive Islamic issues, because they are afraid of being labeled as blasphemous." (Blasphemy is a capital offense.) Women journalists also told UNAMA that they "refrain from criticizing warlords and other power brokers, or covering topics that are deemed contentious such as women's rights." A series of assassinations of prominent women, beginning in 2005, have driven many women from work and public life. Women working in women's organizations in Kabul regularly receive threatening letters and, recently, high-tech videos on their mobile phones showing women being raped.

The Taliban claim responsibility for some, but not all, of the assassinations and threats, while most members of the Karzai government maintain a complicit silence. These developments

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# Noted.

**TONY JUDT, 1948–2010:** Last October, the historian **Tony Judt** was brought onstage at New York University's Skirball Center in a wheelchair, his arms and torso wrapped in a blanket, his face partially obscured by a breathing tube. In this hobbled state, Judt delivered a bracing talk about the modern worship of the market, which he reminded his audience was "an acquired taste," not an inescapable human condition. He spoke for nearly two hours, without any notes, sprinkling in quotes from **John Maynard Keynes**, **Adam Smith** and other thinkers, in what turned out to be his final public lecture.

Judt died on August 6 after battling amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, or Lou Gehrig's disease, for almost two years. He was 62 and, as befit a prolific scholar and public intellectual who never shied away from controversy, he did not go quietly. In a matter of months the NYU lecture was expanded into a book, *Ill Fares the Land*; a string of evocative essays blending memoir and historical reflection appeared in *The New York Review of Books*; op-eds and interviews were published in numerous publications, from the *Guardian* to the *New York Times* to this magazine ["Talking With Tony Judt," May 17]. The disease that reduced Judt to a quadriplegic did nothing to diminish the power of his voice, which fused erudition and moral passion in a way that seemed only to deepen as his illness became worse.

Born in London in 1948, Judt grew up in a Jewish household steeped in Marxism, an experience he would later say inured him to sectarian politics. He was a man of the left who belonged to no party or ideological faction: a collection of his essays from 1994 to 2006, *Reappraisals*, includes a withering assessment of the historian and unrepentant communist **Eric Hobsbawm**, as well as a pungent attack on American liberals who supported the Iraq War. Judt opposed that war but supported NATO intervention in Bosnia and Kosovo, not because he lacked clear principles but because, as he told the British *Prospect* recently, "I don't believe that one should have one-size-fits-all moral rules for international political action."

It was the view of a historian whose judgments were grounded in the messy whirl of human experience rather than the shifting political currents of the day. As he explained in *Reappraisals*, Judt feared that we have entered a new "age of forgetting," in which social safety nets are shredded by politicians with no appreciation for the achievements of the modern state and no memory of the cataclysms wrought by mass insecurity during the twentieth century. The sense that history was being ignored fueled a strain of pessimism in Judt. Yet he never succumbed to the smug fatalism that has led so many academics to talk only among themselves.

To people with narrower minds, Judt will be remembered solely, and bitterly, for the critical words he penned about Israel, in particular a 2003 *NYRB* essay calling for a one-state solution to the Palestinian conflict. A secular universalist who abandoned Zionism after a passionate flirtation with it during his youth, Judt earned himself the loathing of the American Jewish establishment, which accused him of viewing his heritage with indifference, even embarrassment. But as Judt recently made plain in a moving essay about a distant relative, **Toni Avegael**, who died in Auschwitz (and after whom he was named), this could scarcely be less true. "Judaism for me is a sensibility of collective self-questioning and uncomfortable truth-telling," he wrote. "I feel a debt of responsibility to this past. It is why I am Jewish."

The author of these words was, to me, not only a source of inspiration but also a friend. We met through the Remarque Forum, a transatlantic colloquium that Judt presided over through the **Remarque Institute** at NYU. Although he could be caustic in print, in person Tony was wry, warm, witty. He was also a lover of dialogue who believed the exchange of ideas across borders and cultures was inherently valuable. As in his writing, which was elegant, muscular and astonishingly wide-ranging, Tony spoke in graceful sentences while moving effortlessly across time and space, but he also took an intense interest in what people with different experiences had to say. The enduring image I hold of him is at the head of a discussion table, moderating a conversation about the role of religion in public life at a ranch in rural Texas, surrounded by guests who include a human rights advocate from Western Europe, an African-American minister from San Antonio and a scholar from Turkey. Tony's sleeves are rolled up, his eyes are focused and he is vigorously engaged in the world he did so much to disturb, enrich and enlighten. EYAL PRESS

**CITIZENS ON THE MOVE:** My article "Citizens Unite Against *Citizens United*" [August 16/23] detailed how progressive groups, led by **MoveOn.org**, are mobilizing to combat the Supreme Court decision allowing unlimited corporate spending in federal elections. Recent events bring a mixed bag of news. Under pressure from New York City public advocate **Bill de Blasio**, **Goldman Sachs** said that it would refrain from spending corporate funds on "electioneering communications." **Bank of America**, **Citigroup** and **Wells Fargo** pledged to follow suit, a major victory for campaign-finance reformers.

But Minnesota-based retail behemoth **Target** took the opposite tack, donating $150,000 to conservative group **Minnesota Forward**, which is supporting state Representative **Tom Emmer**, the **Sarah Palin**–endorsed Tea Party darling for governor. MoveOn reacted swiftly, urging its members to boycott Target. On August 6, MoveOn delivered 260,000 signatures to the company's Minneapolis headquarters. Target CEO **Gregg Steinhafel**, a major GOP donor, apologized for the donation but refused to rule out future expenditures.

Elsewhere, a consortium of coal companies in West Virginia and Kentucky, including **Massey Energy**—owner of the Upper Big Branch mine, where twenty-nine miners were killed in April—is planning to target "anti-coal" Democrats this fall. "With the recent Supreme Court ruling, we are in a position to be able to take corporate positions that were not previously available in allowing our voices to be heard," wrote **Roger Nicholson**, general counsel at **International Coal Group**.

The disturbing prospect of a flood of corporate money into the midterm elections underscores the need for the Senate to pass the **DISCLOSE Act**, which has been filibustered by Republicans, and for Congress to enact systemic reforms to counteract *Citizens United*, most notably the **Fair Elections Now Act**. ARI BERMAN

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have sent into reverse what little progress women in the cities had made since 2001, while most women in the countryside have seen no progress at all, and untold thousands have been harmed and displaced by warfare. All this has taken place on Karzai's watch and much of it with his connivance. Our government complains that the Karzai administration is corrupt, but the greater problem—never mentioned—is that it is fundamentalist. The cabinet, courts and Parliament are all largely controlled by men who differ from the Taliban chiefly in their choice of turbans.

If our government were truly concerned about the lives of women in Afghanistan, it would have invited women to the table to take part in decision-making about the future of their country, beginning with the Bonn conference in 2001. Instead, they have been consistently left out.

Our long history of woeful policies has put us and Afghan women in a double bind. If we leave, the Taliban may seize power or allow themselves to be bought in exchange for a substantial share of the government, to the detriment of women. But if we stay, the Taliban may simply continue to creep into power, or they may allow themselves to be bought (or "reconciled") in exchange for bribes and a substantial share of the government, all to the detriment of women, while we go on fighting to preserve that same government. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's assurance that "reconciled" Taliban will agree to observe women's rights under the Constitution is either cynical or naïve in the extreme. And the US pretense that somehow women's rights will be preserved if only we stay long enough to shore up the Karzai regime and the ragtag Afghan National Army is at best a delusion. Yet the specter of the demon Taliban somehow makes it seem plausible.

Before feminists and the antiwar left come to blows, we might do well to consider that every Afghan woman or girl who still goes to work or school does so with the support of a progressive husband or father. Several husbands of prominent working women have been killed for not keeping their wives at home, and many are threatened. What's taking place in Afghanistan is commonly depicted, as it is on the *Time* cover, as a battle of the forces of freedom, democracy and women's rights (that is, the United States and the Karzai government) against the demon Taliban. But the real struggle is between progressive Afghan women and men, many of them young, and a phalanx of regressive forces. For the United States, the problem is this: the regressive forces militating against women's rights and a democratic future for Afghanistan are headed by the demon Taliban, to be sure, but they also include the fundamentalist (and fundamentally misogynist) Karzai government, and us.

ANN JONES

*Ann Jones writes frequently for* The Nation *on Afghanistan.*

## Calvin Trillin, Deadline Poet

### Disdain Will Reign if You Nip Off to Spain

*(A conversation that White House advisers who'd seen* My Fair Lady *might have had with Michelle Obama before her vacation.)*

"Disdain will reign if you nip off to Spain.
Disdain will reign if you nip off to Spain."
"And what would raise less Cain?"
"Say, Maine, by train.
Somewhere in this domain
You should remain.
We ascertain that someplace more mundane—
A camping ground or something in that vein—
Would be much more germane.
If you could deign
To now refrain from Spain,
Which reeks champagne…"
"Refrain from Spain 'cause someone may complain?
Refrain from Spain? You take me for insane?"

# WikiLeaks and War Crimes

COMMENT

Four months before WikiLeaks rocketed to international notoriety, the Robin Hoods of the Internet quietly published a confidential CIA document labeled "NOFORN" (for "no foreign nationals")—meaning that it should not be shared even with US allies. That's because the March "Red Cell Special Memorandum" was a call to arms for a propaganda war to influence public opinion in allied nations. The CIA report describes a crisis in European support for the Afghanistan war, noting that 80 percent of German and French citizens are against increasing their countries' military involvement. The report suggests that "Afghan women could serve as ideal messengers in humanizing the [International Security Assistance Force] role in combating the Taliban because of women's ability to speak personally and credibly about their experiences under the Taliban, their aspirations for the future, and their fears of a Taliban victory."

On July 25 WikiLeaks published its massive cache of classified documents on the war in Afghanistan. Four days later, *Time* magazine posted on its website its August 9 cover story, featuring a horrifying image of a beautiful young Afghan woman named Aisha with a gaping hole where her nose once was, under the headline "What Happens if We Leave Afghanistan"—echoing the strategy laid out in the Red Cell report [see Ann Jones, "Our Afghan Demons," page 4].

These two media events unfolded in starkly different ways. While *Time* has been praised for telling Aisha's story, WikiLeaks has been characterized as a criminal syndicate with blood on its hands. Former Bush administration speechwriter Marc Thiessen

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called for the United States to use whatever means necessary to snatch WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, including rendering him from abroad. Others have called for the United States to shut down WikiLeaks and prosecute its members. Michigan Republican Congressman Mike Rogers has called for the alleged leaker, 22-year-old Army intelligence analyst Bradley Manning, to be executed if he is convicted.

*Time* managing editor Richard Stengel drew the contrast with WikiLeaks in an editor's letter accompanying the story, claiming that the WikiLeaks documents, unlike the *Time* article, fail to provide "insight into the way life is lived" in Afghanistan or to speak to "the consequences of the important decisions that lie ahead." Actually, the documents do exactly that. WikiLeaks may not be a media outlet and Assange may not be a journalist, but why does it matter? The documents provide concrete evidence of widespread US killings of Afghan civilians and attempts to cover up killings, and they portray unaccountable Special Operations forces as roaming the country hunting people—literally. They describe incidents of mass outrage sparked by the killing of civilians and confirm that the United States is funding both sides of the war through bribes paid to the Taliban and other resistance forces.

There was a brief moment when it seemed the contents of the WikiLeaks documents would spark an inquiry into what they say about the war and the way the United States is conducting it. "However illegally these documents came to light, they raise serious questions about the reality of America's policy toward Pakistan and Afghanistan," said Senator John Kerry, chair of the powerful Foreign Relations Committee, on the day the documents were revealed. "Those policies are at a critical stage, and these documents may very well underscore the stakes and make the calibrations needed to get the policy right more urgent."

But two days later, the official meme about WikiLeaks was in full swing: the leaks had endangered American lives. Kerry swiftly changed his tune. "I think it's important not to overhype or get excessively excited about the meaning of those documents," Kerry said at a hearing on Afghanistan.

But what if what Daniel Ellsberg says about the leaker being a heroic whistleblower is true? What if, like Ellsberg with the Pentagon Papers, Manning really was motivated by conscience to leak documents he believed the American people and the world deserved to see?

Then again, Manning—who has been charged only in connection with the release of the "Collateral Murder" video of a helicopter assault in Iraq—might not even be the leaker. Assange has not confirmed any dealings between WikiLeaks and Manning. In Manning's online chats with Adrian Lamo, the hacker turned government informant who turned him in, Manning claimed to have access to 260,000 classified State Department cables exposing "almost criminal political backdealings." Lamo asked Manning to list the "highlights" of what he gave to WikiLeaks. Among those described by Manning are documents on the US Joint Task Force at Guantánamo, which Manning called the "Gitmo papers," a video of an airstrike in Afghanistan that killed civilians and State Department cables—the information, Manning said, would cause Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to "have a heart attack." Curiously, there was no mention of Afghan war documents. We may never know whether Manning leaked those documents. But what is clear from the chat logs is that Manning believed he was performing a public service by leaking what he did.

In one chat, Manning and Lamo are discussing Manning's passing of documents to WikiLeaks. Lamo asks Manning what his "endgame" is. Manning replies, "god knows what happens now," and adds, "hopefully worldwide discussion, debates, and reforms if not… than [*sic*] we're doomed as a species."

In one of his last chats with Lamo, reportedly on May 25, Manning says, "what if i were someone more malicious i could've sold to russia or china, and made bank?"

"why didn't you?" Lamo asks.

"because it's public data," Manning responds. "information should be free it belongs in the public domain…if its out in the open… it should be a public good." He adds: "im crazy like that."

Within days, Manning was arrested. JEREMY SCAHILL

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*Jeremy Scahill, a Puffin Foundation Writing Fellow at The Nation Institute, is the author of the bestselling* Blackwater: The Rise of the World's Most Powerful Mercenary Army.

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William Greider's latest on **The AIG Bailout Scandal** reveals how the Federal Reserve used taxpayer money to bail out the insurance giant, instead of forcing the major banks to clean up the mess they helped create. In doing so, the Fed may have set the system up for an even bigger fall in the future.

Each week *Nation* contributors appear on GRITtv to expand on their reporting for the magazine. This week on **The Nation on GRITtv**: Betsy Reed on how Republicans are voting in a bloc against any and all of Obama's proposals, and A.C. Thompson on his investigations into post-Katrina vigilantism and the death of Henry Glover in New Orleans.

**We Have Yet to See the Biggest Costs of the BP Spill**, says Raj Patel. If we are to learn anything from the disaster, we must confront the difficult question: what are the true costs of our energy needs?

The healthcare victory was no accident, argues Richard Kirsch in **What Progressives Did Right to Win Healthcare**. The campaign to win healthcare reform was several years in the making and was based on a well-developed and -resourced plan. Kirsch presents the key lessons for future progressive campaigns.

To mark the sixty-fifth anniversary of the atomic attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Greg Mitchell takes a look at government secrecy and press censorship in **How the Truth Was Hidden About Nagasaki**.

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# Alexander Cockburn

## No, the Empire Doesn't Always Win

"The US isn't withdrawing from Iraq at all—it's rebranding the occupation.... What is abundantly clear is that the US...has no intention of letting go of Iraq any time soon." So declared Seumas Milne of the *Guardian* on August 4.

Milne is not alone among writers on the left arguing that even though most Americans think it's all over, Uncle Sam still rules the roost in Iraq. They point to 50,000 US troops in ninety-four military bases, "advising" and training the Iraqi army, "providing security" and carrying out "counterterrorism" missions. Outside US government forces there is what Jeremy Scahill calls the "coming surge" of contractors in Iraq, swelling up from the present 100,000. "The advantage of an outsourced occupation," Milne writes, "is clearly that someone other than US soldiers can do the dying to maintain control of Iraq."

"Can Iraq now be regarded as a tolerably secure outpost of the American system in the Middle East?" Tariq Ali asked in *New Left Review* earlier this year. He answered himself judiciously: "[Iraqis] have reason to exult, and reason to doubt." But the thrust of his analysis depicts Iraq as still the pawn of the US empire, with a "predominantly Shia army—some 250,000 strong...trained and armed to the teeth to deal with any resurgence of the resistance."

The bottom line, as drawn by Milne and Ali, is oil. Milne gestures to the "dozen 20-year contracts to run Iraq's biggest oil fields that were handed out last year to foreign companies."

Is it really true that, though the US troop presence has dropped by almost 100,000 in eighteen months, Iraq is as much under Uncle Sam's imperial jackboot as it was in, say, 2004, even though US troops no longer patrol the streets? If Iraq's political affairs are under US control, how come the US Embassy—deployed in its Vatican City–size compound, mostly as vacant as a foreclosed subdivision in Riverside, California—cannot knock Iraqi heads together and bid them form a government? Those 50,000 troops broiling in their costly bases are scarcely a decisive factor in Iraq's internal affairs. Neither are the private contractors, whose military role should not be oversold, unless the Shiites are supposed to quail before ill-paid Peruvians, Ugandan cops and the like.

Is a Shiite-dominated government really to America's taste and nothing more than its pawn? It was Sistani, denounced by Ali as America's creature, who called Bush on his pledge of free elections in 2005, thus downsizing the excessive representation of the Sunnis, who chose to boycott the elections anyway. And if all this was a devious ploy to break "the Iraqi resistance," by which Ali means the Sunnis, why does the United States constantly invoke the menace of Shiite Iran and decry its influence in Iraq?

If the Sunni "resistance," honored without qualification by Ali, ever had a strategy beyond a sectarian agenda, it wasn't advanced by blowing up Shiite pilgrims and setting off bombs in marketplaces. Muqtada al-Sadr, lamented by Ali as sidelined by the United States and Sistani, has been described as the "kingmaker" since his success in the parliamentary election this past March.

If this really was a "war for oil," it scarcely went well for the United States. Run your eye down the list of contracts the Iraqi government awarded in June and December 2009. Prominent is Russia's Lukoil, which, in partnership with Norway's Statoil, won the rights to West Qurna Phase Two, a 12.9 billion–barrel supergiant oilfield. Other successful bidders for fixed-term contracts included Russia's Gazprom and Malaysia's Petronas. Only two US-based oil companies came away with contracts: ExxonMobil partnered with Royal Dutch Shell on a contract for West Qurna Phase One (8.7 billion barrels in reserves); and Occidental shares a contract in the Zubair field (4 billion barrels), in company with Italy's ENI and South Korea's Kogas. The huge Rumaila field (17 billion barrels) yielded a contract for BP and the China National Petroleum Company, and Royal Dutch Shell split the 12.6 billion–barrel Majnoon field with Petronas, 60-40.

Throughout the two auctions there were frequent bleats from the oil companies at the harsh terms imposed by the auctioneers representing Iraq, as this vignette from Reuters about the bidding on the northern Najmah field suggests: "Sonangol also won the nearby 900-million-barrel Najmah oilfield in Nineveh.... Again, the Angolan firm had to cut its price and accept a fee of $6 per barrel, less than the $8.50 it had sought. 'We are expecting a little bit higher. Can you go a little bit higher?' Sonangol's exploration manager Paulino Jeronimo asked Iraqi Oil Minister Hussain al-Shahristani to spontaneous applause from other oil executives. Shahristani said, 'No.'"

So either the all-powerful US government was unable to fix the auctions to its liking or the all-powerful US-based oil companies mostly decided the profit margins weren't sufficiently tempting. Either way, the "war for oil" isn't in very good shape.

Ali and Milne are being credulous in taking at face value declarations by US officials that the United States is not wholly withdrawing and will stay in business in Iraq for the foreseeable future. Those officials don't want to see their influence go to zilch, so they have to maintain that their power in Iraq is only a little affected by the steady reduction of troops.

The left—or a substantial slice of it—snatches defeat from the jaws of a decisive victory over US plans for Iraq by proclaiming that America has established what Milne calls "a new form of outsourced semi-colonial regime to maintain its grip on the country and region." Yes, Iraq is in ruins—always the default consequence of American imperial endeavors. The left should hammer home the message that the US onslaught on Iraq, in terms of its proclaimed objectives, was a strategic and military disaster. That's the lesson to bring home. ■

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# Katha Pollitt

## Ground Zero for Free Speech

Park51, *aka* Cordoba House, won't be a mosque; it will be a $100 million, thirteen-story cultural center with a pool, gym, auditorium and prayer room. It won't be at Ground Zero; it will be two blocks away. (By the way, two mosques have existed in the neighborhood for years.) It won't be a shadowy storefront where radical clerics recruit young suicide bombers; it will be a showplace of moderate Islam, an Islam for the pluralist West—the very thing wise heads in the United States and Europe agree is essential to integrate Muslim immigrants and prevent them from becoming fundamentalists and even terrorists. "It's a shame we even have to talk about this," says Mayor Michael Bloomberg, a longtime supporter of the project.

Apparently we do, because the same right-wingers who talk about the Constitution as if Sarah Palin had tweeted it herself apparently skipped over the First Amendment, where freedom of speech and worship are guaranteed to all. "America is experiencing an Islamist cultural-political offensive designed to undermine and destroy our civilization," claims Newt Gingrich, who argues that the United States can't let Muslims build a "mosque" "at Ground Zero" because Saudi Arabia doesn't permit the building of churches and synagogues. For a man who warns that Sharia law is coming soon to a courthouse near you, Gingrich seems strangely eager to accept Saudi standards of religious tolerance. Isn't the whole point that ours is an open society and theirs is closed? "This is a desecration," says former Mayor Rudy Giuliani. "Nobody would allow something like that at Pearl Harbor. Let's have some respect for who died there and why they died there. Let's not put this off on some kind of politically correct theory." I'm not aware of any Japanese-Americans trying to build a Shinto shrine at Pearl Harbor, but what if they had? Why would that be so terrible? (Oh, and "politically correct theory"? Would that be the First Amendment? Giuliani never did have much fondness for pesky old free speech.)

And then there's Sarah Palin, America's Tweetheart: "Peace-seeking Muslims, pls understand, Ground Zero mosque is UNNECESSARY provocation; it stabs hearts. Pls reject it in interest of healing." Yes, peace-seeking Muslims, just crawl back into your cave and leave us real Americans alone so we can get over the terrible crime committed by people who are not you! Thirty-three years ago, the language of healing wasn't powerful enough to keep the National Socialists of America from marching in Skokie, Illinois—home to many Holocaust survivors—and kudos to the ACLU for defending the freedom of assembly even of those worst of the worst, a position that was not at all obvious at the time. But we've been thoroughly bathed in psychobabble since then, so it's not surprising that sophisticated opponents like Abraham Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League, have adopted that cloying lingo: "strong passions…keen sensitivities… counterproductive to the healing process." As Foxman wrote in a statement, "ultimately this is not a question of rights, but a question of what is right. In our judgment, building an Islamic Center in the shadow of the World Trade Center will cause some victims more pain—unnecessarily—and that is not right."

Actually, there are 9/11 survivors and families on both sides of the Park51 proposal. Opening the center is "consistent with fundamental American values of freedom and justice for all," said the group September 11 Families for Peaceful Tomorrows. And although a Marist poll found that 53 percent of New York City residents oppose the center, 53 percent of Manhattanites support it—let's hear it for the much-mocked Upper West Side. But even if all the survivors, and every inhabitant of the World Trade Center's home borough, were united against it, that should not carry the day. The Constitution is not a Tylenol pill. It's not about making hurt people feel better—or pandering to the resentments of bigots, either. Nor is it about polls or majority votes. If it were, freedom of speech would not be possible, because as Rosa Luxemburg said, freedom is "always… for the one who thinks differently." It would be nice if our elected officials, who swore an oath to defend the Constitution, got the message. Instead, we have mostly silence, with Governor David Paterson offering state land if Park51 agreed to move elsewhere. That man just can't seem to do anything right.

What's especially odd about the Park51 flap is that Palin, Gingrich and other right-wing opponents delight in waving the Constitution about and professing to revere its every word. They, after all, are the ones who love religion so much, they think the First Amendment is all about privileging it over secularism. Don't tread on me with your evil humanist jackboot! The argument that religion should not be imposed on public spaces—a public-school classroom, say—has never made sense to them. In their mythology, believers are a persecuted minority because the ACLU won't let biology teachers suggest that Earth might well be only 10,000 years old. It turns out that by religion they mean only Christianity. Indeed, Tennessee Tea Party gubernatorial candidate Ron Ramsey suggests that Islam isn't a religion but a cult—as if the world's 1.5 billion Muslims are sleep-deprived runaways controlled by an evil mastermind.

The attempt by Gingrich and others to portray Park51 as part of a planned Islamic takeover of the United States is shameful and ridiculous. America is a secular democracy in which at least three-quarters of the population are committed Christians, and hedonism is a way of life. Almost nobody, even among American Muslims, is interested in the supposed aims of militant Islam——polygyny, forcing women into burqas, banning pork and alcohol and music, instituting Sharia law. Fear of Muslim rule is even more preposterous than what it has so efficiently replaced—fear of communist rule—and one day it will look just as bizarre.

By then, I hope Park51 will be a modern landmark in the city Mayor Bloomberg proudly called the freest in the world. ■

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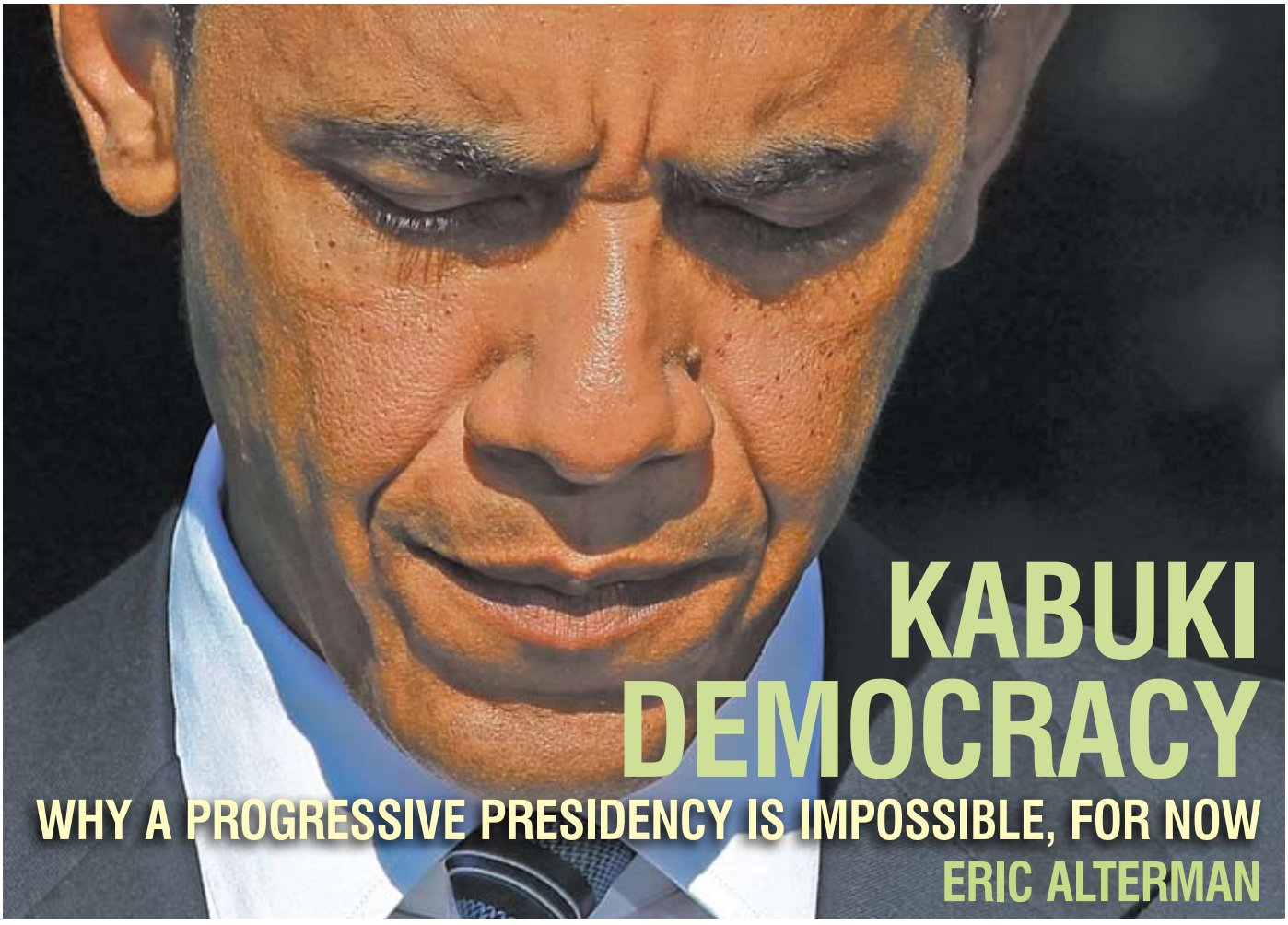

# KABUKI DEMOCRACY

## WHY A PROGRESSIVE PRESIDENCY IS IMPOSSIBLE, FOR NOW

ERIC ALTERMAN

Few progressives would take issue with the argument that, significant accomplishments notwithstanding, the Obama presidency has been a big disappointment. As Mario Cuomo famously observed, candidates campaign in poetry but govern in prose. Still, Obama supporters have been asked to swallow some painfully "prosaic" compromises. In order to pass his healthcare legislation, for instance, Obama was required to specifically repudiate his pledge to prochoice voters to "make preserving women's rights under *Roe v. Wade* a priority as president." That promise apparently was lost in the same drawer as his insistence that "any plan I sign must include an insurance exchange…including a public option." Labor unions were among his most fervent and dedicated foot soldiers, as well as the key to any likely progressive renaissance, and many were no doubt inspired by his pledge "to fight for the passage of the Employee Free Choice Act." Yet that bill appears deader than Jimmy Hoffa. Environmentalists were no doubt steeled through the frigid days of New Hampshire canvassing by Obama's promise that he would "set a hard cap on all carbon emissions at a level that scientists say is necessary to curb global warming—an 80 percent reduction by 2050." That goal appears to have gone up the chimney in thick black smoke. And remember when Obama promised, right before the election, to "put in place the common-sense regulations and rules of the road I've been calling for since March—rules that will keep our market free, fair and honest; rules that will restore accountability and responsibility in our corporate boardrooms"? Neither, apparently, does he. Indeed, if one examines the gamut of legislation passed and executive orders issued that relate to the promises made by candidate Obama, one can only wince at the slightly hyperbolic joke made by late-night comedian Jimmy Fallon, who quipped that the president's goal appeared to be to "finally deliver on the campaign promises made by John McCain."

None of us know what lies in the president's heart. It's possible that he fooled gullible progressives during the election into believing he was a left-liberal partisan when in fact he is much closer to a conservative corporate shill. An awful lot of progressives, including two I happen to know who sport Nobel Prizes on their shelves, feel this way, and their perspective cannot be completely discounted. The Beltway view of Obama, meanwhile, posits just the opposite. According to that view—insistently repeated, for instance, by the *Wall Street Journal*'s nonpartisan, nonideological news columnist Gerald Seib—the president's problem is that he and his allies in the Democratic Party "just overplayed their hand in the last year and a half, moving policy too far left, sparking an equal and opposite reaction in the rightward direction." (Obama's biggest mistake, seconded *The Atlantic Monthly*'s

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Clive Crook, was his failure to "repudiate the left" and "make it [his] enemy." And Newt Gingrich, speaking from what is actually considered by these same Beltway types to be the responsible center of the Republican Party, calls Obama "the most radical president in American history" and "potentially, the most dangerous" as he urges his minions to resist the president's "secular, socialist machine."

Personally, I tend more toward the view expressed by the young, conservative *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat, that Obama is a "liberal who's always willing to cut a deal and grab for half the loaf. He has the policy preferences of a progressive blogger, but the governing style of a seasoned Beltway wheeler-dealer." During the presidential campaign Obama bravely praised Ronald Reagan for putting forth bold ideas that "changed the trajectory of American politics." But as president he has chosen to work for whatever deal might already be on the table, relying instead on the philosophy of one of his early Chicago mentors, Denny Jacobs, who told Obama biographer David Remnick, "Sometimes you can't get the whole hog, so you take the ham sandwich."

**It doesn't much matter what Obama dreams of. The far more important fact is that the system is rigged, and it's rigged against us.**

But the truth, dear reader, is that it does not much matter who is right about what Barack Obama dreams of in his political imagination. Nor are the strategic mistakes made by the Obama team really all that crucial, except perhaps at the margins of any given policy. The far more important fact, for progressive purposes, is simply this: the system is rigged, and it's rigged against us.

Sure, presidents can pretty easily pass tax cuts for the wealthy and powerful corporations. They can start whatever wars they wish and wiretap whomever they want without warrants. They can order the torture of terrorist suspects, lie about it and see that their intelligence services destroy the evidence. But what they cannot do, even with supermajorities in both houses of Congress behind them, is pass the kind of transformative progressive legislation that Obama promised in his 2008 presidential campaign.

The American political system is nothing if not complicated, and so too are the reasons for its dysfunction. Some are endemic to our constitutional regime and all but impossible to address save by the extremely cumbersome (and profoundly unlikely) prospect of amending the Constitution. Others are the result of a corrupt capital culture that likes it that way and has little incentive to change. Many are the result of the peculiar commercial and ideological structure of our media, which not only frame our political debate but also determine which issues will be addressed. A few are purely functions of the politics of the moment or just bad luck. If we really mean to change things, instead of just complaining about them, it would behoove us to figure out which of these choke points can be opened up and which cannot. For if our politicians cannot keep the promises they make as candidates, then our commitment to democracy becomes a kind of Kabuki exercise; it resembles a democratic process at great distance but mocks its genuine intentions in substance. I go into great detail about these phenomena in my article "Kabuki Democracy: Why a Progressive Presidency Is Impossible, for Now" (available at TheNation.com), but below is a précis.

§ *The Bush legacy.* We live, as the late Tony Judt wrote, in an "age of forgetting," and nowhere is this truer than in our political discourse. Rarely do we stop to remind ourselves that, as a *New York Times* editorial put it, Obama "took office under an extraordinary burden of problems created by President George W. Bush's ineptness and blind ideology." America's most irresponsible, incompetent and ideologically obsessed presidency not only left many political and economic crises on its successor's plate; these crises were so prominent as to mask equally significant problems that received virtually no attention. Think about the Minerals Management Service, where chaos, corruption and incompetence competed with genuine malevolence to empower BP to ignore so many safety rules before the big oil spill. Now multiply that by virtually the entire government regulatory structure, and you have some idea of the kind of mess left by Bush and Cheney to the Obama administration.

§ *The structure of the Senate and the power of the minority.* Faced with countless challenges merely to restore some sensible equilibrium to policy regarding, say, long-term deficits or financial regulation, Obama faces the conundrum of a system that, as currently constructed, gives the minority party no strategic stake in sensible governance. While the Democrats, even in the minority, do participate in solutions designed to improve governance, this is rarely true of Republicans, who are suspicious of government on principle and opposed to successful programs in practice, and have recently grown radicalized to the point where a great many of their complaints about Obama—whether that he is a "socialist" or a "Nazi" or a "liar" or was born in Kenya—are contrary to even the most basic forms of common sense. They now have myriad means to bottle up legislation, and no special interest is deemed too small or insignificant to monkey up the works.

§ *The power of money.* Of course, when attempting to determine why the people's will is so frequently frustrated in our system, one must turn first and foremost to the power of money. The nonpartisan Center for Responsive Politics calculated that approximately $3.47 billion was spent lobbying the government in 2009, up from $3.3 billion the previous year. Despite Obama's attempts to transform the way business is transacted in Washington, special-interest money remains so influential that it is simply foolish to discuss the outcome of almost any policy debate in Congress without focusing first on who was buying what from whom. What's more, the problems

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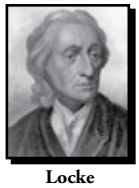
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caused by money in the system are certain to worsen in the near future as a result of the recent Supreme Court ruling that struck down a century of laws limiting corporate spending for political candidates in the name of "free speech." This has opened up new opportunities for all corporations, particularly those working through the Chamber of Commerce, which now acts as a middleman for many corporations looking to act without footprints.

§ *The culture of finance.* In a phenomenon that mimics the observations of the long-jailed Italian communist philosopher Antonio Gramsci, the economists Simon Johnson and James Kwak note that during the 1990s, when both parties benefited from massive investments in Congressional war chests by investment bankers and their allies, "the ideology of Wall Street—that unfettered innovation and unregulated financial markets were good for America and the world—became the consensus position in Washington on both sides of the political aisle." As a result, lobbyists' talking points became "self-evident." And their offers of jobs to underpaid, overworked Congressional staffers, irresistible.

We need a system that has better, fairer rules, reduces the role of money, and keeps politicians and journalists honest.

§ *The power of American ideology.* It was the liberal hero Thomas Paine who first opined that "the government is best which governs least," and this retains a powerful appeal to many Americans regardless of the merits of any given government program, making these programs far easier to oppose than to support, to say nothing of the question of taxation.

§ *Aggressive dishonesty and partisanship in the conservative media.* As a result of a more than forty-year assault on journalism by right-wing funders—coupled with the decimation of so many once-proud journalistic institutions—an awful lot of the most influential perches in what remains of our media are occupied by people whose loyalty to journalism is vastly outweighed by their commitment to conservative talking points. Despite recent investments and advances, nothing on the left can compare to the power of talk-radio, Fox News and their network of like-minded multimillion-dollar think tanks.

§ *Weaknesses of the MSM.* The seepage of Fox-style conservatism into the rest of the MSM is only one of the roadblocks progressives must overcome. There is also the decline in reporting, the relentless focus on personality, the low level of intellectual discourse, the intensive focus on a single narrative, the obsession with celebrity and the relative lack of attention devoted to almost any remotely complex public policy issue.

All of these developments represent significant structural impediments to any progressive-minded president seeking to carry out his democratic mandate, even one who comes to Washington with ostensibly impregnable majorities in both houses of Congress. Obviously, if America is to be rescued from the grip of its democratic dysfunction, then merely electing better candidates to Congress is not going to be enough. We need a system that has better, fairer rules; reduces the role of money; and keeps politicians and journalists honest in their portrayal of what's actually going on.

Since the Obama administration is clearly happier with a top-down approach, progressives who take movement organizing seriously need to develop their institutions independently. To do so, however, they will have to put aside traditional differences that have separated them in the past, particularly those between liberals and progressives who think of themselves as left of liberal.

Progressives, including groups like Media Matters and FAIR, have already begun to put pressure on the mainstream media not to adopt the deliberately misleading and frequently false frames foisted on readers and viewers by an increasingly self-confident and well-funded right-wing noise machine. This needs to be kept up. (It also, and this is key, needs to be polite. No journalist is going to respond to the kind of personal abuse that is all too common in newspaper comment sections and other such forums for MSM complaint.) Exerted properly, such pressure is an effective means of forcing journalists to rethink some of their reflexive prejudices, particularly in today's punishing economic environment.

Indeed, with regard to almost every single one of our problems, we need better, smarter organizing at every level and a willingness on the part of liberals and leftists to work with what remains of the center to enact reforms that are a beginning rather than an endpoint in the process of societal transformation. As American history consistently instructs us, this is pretty much the only way things change in our system. Over time, reforms like Social Security, Medicare and the Voting Rights Act can add up to a kind of revolution, one that succeeds without bloodshed or widespread destruction of order, property or necessary institutions.

One hopeful hypothesis—one I'm tempted to share—on the Obama administration's willingness to compromise so extensively on the promises that candidate Obama made during the 2008 campaign would be that as president, he is playing for time. Obama is taking the best deal on the table today, but one expects that once he is re-elected in 2012—a pretty strong bet, I'd say—he will build on the foundations laid during his first term to bring about the fundamental "change" that is not possible in today's environment. This would be consistent with FDR's strategy during his second term and makes a kind of sense when one considers the nature of the opposition he faces today and the likelihood that it will discredit itself following a takeover of one or both houses in 2010. For that strategy to make sense, however, 2013 will have to provide a more pregnant sense of progressive possibility than 2009 did, and that will take a great deal of work by the rest of us.

To borrow from Hillel the Elder: "If not now, when? If not us, who?" ■

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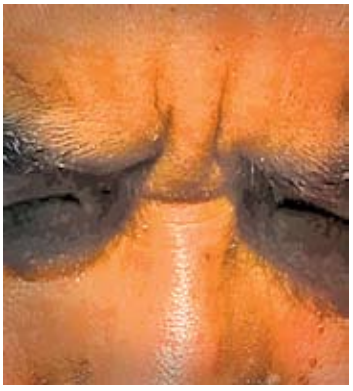
REPLIES TO ERIC ALTERMAN'S "KABUKI DEMOCRACY"

## Michael Kazin

If the left were not somewhat unhappy with Barack Obama, it would not be much of a left. That, in effect, is the underlying point of Eric Alterman's excellent survey of the obstacles confronting a presidency the typical *Nation* reader could rush to celebrate. From the legacy of Bush-era incompetence and corruption to the partisan discipline of the GOP and the Roberts Court to the influence of lobbyists, one marvels that the president has accomplished anything at all. Progressive historians may well praise Obama and the Democrats for passing healthcare reform, a major stimulus and stiffer financial regulation in the face of so many structural and ideological barriers.



Still, when Senator Richard Durbin admits that the barons of banking "frankly own" the most powerful legislative body in the world, he is revealing how stark is the crisis that progressives confront. Eighteen months ago, many of us thought Obama's tenure might rival the triumphs of FDR's first term and of LBJ during the halcyon days of the Great Society. Now one merely hopes he will be able to blunt the GOP's offensive long enough to win four more years in office.

But as Alterman suggests, the way to confront this reality is not to kvetch that Obama is not living up to our fondest hopes. Amid the euphoria of 2008, too many Barackophiles—of which I was one—failed to realize that no presidential campaign, whatever its rhetorical flourishes, can substitute for a social movement. Both FDR and LBJ had to respond to potent insurgencies on their left—industrial labor for Roosevelt, black freedom for Johnson. Each of these movements gestated for decades before emerging as a force that could make or unmake a presidency.

Since the feminist awakening of the 1970s, we have had several grassroots campaigns—successful ones, like the battle against apartheid; apparent busts, like the much-hyped crusade for global economic justice; and some that are still fighting for their causes (global warming, gay marriage). But there has not been a mass campaign, much less a movement, capable of addressing what should be the central domestic issue of our time: the yawning gap in income, education and healthcare between the economic elite and a majority of working Americans. Abundant analysis on this issue can be found in periodicals and websites on the left. But to translate a terrible problem into an inescapable issue requires organizations that can mobilize millions. And with private-sector unionism in perhaps terminal decline, it is not clear who will provide the organizing muscle.

While the left cannot instantly conjure up the movement we need, it can revive the tradition of speaking in credible, urgent, moral ways about the need to enact policies to aid the great majority. Alterman refers to Bush's "ideologically obsessed presidency." What enabled these obsessives to have their way—until the Hurricane Katrina debacle—was that their ideology reigned for decades. To most Americans, the idea of slashing taxes and cutting back on regulation sounded like common sense.

Amid the frustrations of Obama's term, those notions seem dominant once again. In July Don Blankenship, in whose West Virginia mine twenty-nine workers died this past spring, told an audience at the National Press Club, "Corporate business is what built America, in my opinion, and we need to let it thrive by, in a sense, leaving it alone." Such an obscenity—and the worldview that lies behind it—should be publicized as widely as possible.

Progressives and their sometime allies in the White House do enjoy one advantage over their opponents: unlike in the heyday of Reaganism, the American right cannot pose a single serious answer to any problem plaguing the United States or the world. Give the Great Communicator his due: communism was a tyrannical system, and liberals in the 1980s did discount the practical virtues of entrepreneurial innovation.

But a Republican Party and a conservative movement that follow the lead of Glenn Beck and Sarah Palin are dwelling in a land of perilous delusions. We need people who can broadcast that fact repeatedly and in imaginative ways—and who are rooted as much in old factory towns and fast-growing exurbs as in places like Manhattan and Berkeley. Once the left starts doing that, clever politicians will follow—at least part of the way.

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*Michael Kazin teaches history at Georgetown University. He is co-editor of* Dissent *and the author of* American Dreamers: How the Left Changed a Nation, *which will be published next year by Knopf.*

## Barbara Ehrenreich

So a black man finally wins the presidency, only to discover that it's about as useful as a 32 cent stamp. According to Eric Alterman, the federal government, avatar of liberal hope for at least a century, has become hopelessly undemocratic, poisoned by corruption and structurally snarled by partisan divisions. Poor Barack Obama, who steps up to the plate and gets handed a foam bat!

The government, as Alterman convincingly describes it, is not only expensive, "bloated" and all the rest. It has become a handmaid to corporate power—a hiring hall from which compliant officials are selected for vastly more lucrative private-sector jobs, as well as an emergency cash reserve

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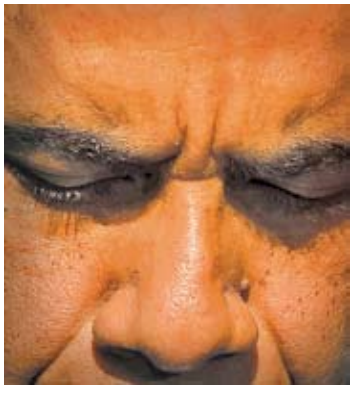
for companies that fall on hard times. No wonder so many Americans unthinkingly conflate "big government" and "big corporations." This is not the kind of government that hires unemployed people to paint murals on post office walls. And, as everyone knows, when the bank decides to repossess your home, it's a public employee who will kick in the door.

All that should be enough to sour liberals' trust in government as a tool for progressive social change. But the situation is much worse than Alterman acknowledges. In the years since government—state and local as well as federal—has shed its role as a kindly change agent, it has assumed a new one as über-cop: building more penitentiaries, snapping up stoners, harassing blacks and Latino-looking people on the streets. Nonviolent protests have dwindled, not only because of activists' lingering deference toward Obama but because the police response to any outdoor gathering so resembles the assault on Falluja.

Even the more helpful government programs have become agents of an increasingly repressive state. Food stamp offices, public housing complexes and homeless shelters are the sites of "warrant searches" used to gather up people who might have missed a court date concerning an unpaid debt. Public housing residents are subjected to drug tests; in many states, the process of applying for what remains of welfare (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families) parallels that of being booked by the police, complete with mug shots and fingerprints. Although you won't find them out campaigning against ICE raids and urban stop-and-frisk programs, some of the Tea Partyers seem to dimly understand this, with one handmade poster at last year's 9/12 demonstration in Washington saying, for example, Government Health Care = Pee in a Cup.



And what is a liberal to make of the city of Maywood, California, which more or less disbanded itself in June, outsourcing all municipal functions—sounds like a liberal nightmare, right? Until you read that the now-defunct police department was found by the state in 2009 to be "permeated with sexual innuendo, harassment, vulgarity…and a lack of cultural, racial and ethnic sensitivity and respect."

Alterman acknowledges the problem only tentatively, observing that "one might argue that this [Democratic] faith in government's ability to improve people's lives is misplaced." You betcha. The role of the left should not be to uphold or defend the government, meaning, for now, the corpo-Obama-Geithner-Petraeus state, but to change it, drastically and from the ground up. That may sound overly radical to Alterman, who seems to want "progressives who think of themselves as left of liberal" to abandon even that tiny distinction. But as the Tea Partyers keep reminding us in their nasty and demented ways, these are revolutionary times.

*Barbara Ehrenreich is the author, most recently, of* Bright-sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking Has Undermined America.

## Norman Ornstein

Eric Alterman is far more right than wrong about what ails our political process, and what makes the possibility of sweeping social change by Barack Obama a steeply uphill climb. The biggest caveat I would offer is that it has never been easy to achieve sweeping social change; we can count on one hand the times, even throughout US history, when Washington acted across the board to transform society. It almost always takes a major election that puts the reins of power comfortably in the hands of a president's party, with swollen majorities, combined with enough of a sense of national crisis, to overcome our cultural reticence to take a leap of faith.

That happened in 1933 with the New Deal and again in 1965 with the Great Society (although this was fueled less by crisis and more by the combination of LBJ momentum, Democratic supermajorities and the Kennedy assassination). While America was transformed to some degree by Reagan, his sweeping election did not give Republicans all the reins of power or numbers large enough to dismantle the Great Society or a sizable share of the New Deal.

In 1933 and 1965, Republicans vigorously resisted the initiatives of FDR and LBJ, using, in FDR's case, rhetoric that would make Glenn Beck and Michelle Bachmann kvell. But in the end, initiatives like Social Security and Medicare got significant GOP support—while the 1964 and 1965 Civil Rights Acts could not have happened without major Republican backing.

That brings us to now. Obama should have had the ingredients to succeed in the same way as FDR and LBJ. He had a landslide win, high popularity and a major economic crisis. But a combination of factors, many of them described by Alterman, showed from the get-go that there would be no way to get any significant bipartisan support for his initiatives. A week into his presidency House Republicans voted unanimously against Obama's move to save the country as it teetered at the edge of deflation and depression—and their leaders danced a victory jig. This set the tone for DC politics going forward, signaling that any success for Obama would have to come by finding majorities among a widely disparate group of Democrats and occasionally picking off a Senate Republican or three.

Operating in a dysfunctional environment dominated by a minority party that thinks its road back to power is to block everything and bring the president to his knees, Obama and his Congressional allies have had remarkable success—far short of revolution, far more than the bitter caldron of partisan rancor and ideological fervor would ordinarily allow.

Money in politics is a major factor as well, and the Roberts Court will go down in history as the Dark Side for unleashing even more big money in an already vulnerable and corrupt system. But there are larger problems relating to modern

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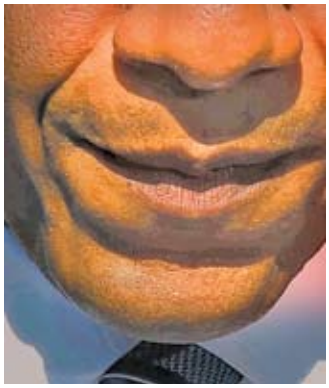
media and political organizing, our coarse culture of discourse and especially the many factors that have created the monster we know as the permanent campaign. Reforms won't erase these problems, but there is one thing to add to Alterman's list: adoption of the Australian practice of mandatory voting. When politics is driven by the need to turn out your base, and policy is then dominated by the desire to cater to that base, it brings out all the base instincts. In Australia, where failure to show up at the polls (you can vote for "none of the above") leads to a $15 fine, attendance is over 95 percent—and politicians cater less to consultants and the extremes (since both bases turn out in equal proportions) and more to the small number of persuadable voters who are not swayed by outrageous rhetoric. Those voters might not fit the typical pattern of readers of *The Nation*, but they are a far better audience to cater to than that of Rush Limbaugh, Glenn Beck and Sean Hannity.



*Norman Ornstein is a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute and the co-author of* The Broken Branch: How Congress Is Failing America and How to Get It Back on Track.

## Salim Muwakkil

Reading Eric Alterman's comprehensive anatomy of the conservative conquest of America did much to reinforce my sense of dread. His account helps clarify the enormity of the challenges facing those working toward building a society more concerned with social justice than with the bottom line. He is particularly deft in outlining the corrupting power of money and lobbyists and how ossified political and media structures stand in the way of progressive change.

What seems to be missing in Alterman's historical summary, however, is the centrality of the "Southern Strategy" and the Republicans' canny exploitation of racial resentment. I can understand his reluctance to address this issue; disentangling strands of racial bias from the libertarian tradition of American populism can be a thankless task, as illustrated by current debates about depictions of the Tea Party movement. But by glossing over the antiblack aspects of the right's rise, Alterman seems to have fallen victim to the same "working the refs" strategy he accuses conservatives of deploying to restrain the so-called liberal bias of the mainstream media. This race-averse analysis is troubling enough when it comes from mainstream pundits paralyzed by the faux symmetry of on-the-other-hand "objectivity." But when a progressive pundit adopts the same frame, it is more distressing still. Indeed, it is yet another example of how a black presidency has scrambled our cultural and political syntax: a usually astute intellectual from the dwindling ranks of America's left pens an essay assessing the prospects of progressive policy from a black president and fails to incorporate any racial analysis in his assessment.

Many have focused on Alterman's statement that progressives are deeply disappointed with the Obama administration as a way to reinforce their own positions, but few seem ready to address his overall, and rather grudging, point: that Obama may well be the most progressive alternative possible in our current reality. Alterman is throwing down the gauntlet to his fellow travelers, urging us to more carefully assess the context in which we find ourselves and devote more energy to organizing than complaining—to get in where we fit in, so to speak. While reading his advice, I couldn't help but think of the late Jimmy Weinstein, founder and longtime editor of *In These Times*, the magazine for which I toil. Jimmy would often find himself at odds with left sectarians for urging more robust engagement with the Democratic Party. Overtly left politics were a hard sell in America, he would argue, but true progressive ideas were inherently popular. If the left organized on specific issues and developed active coalitions around those issues, we could forge a more progressive electorate—despite ourselves.

This advice seems almost elementary, but Alterman used almost 17,000 words to make a case for it. He has joined the chorus urging the intellectual left to rethink its devotion to marginality. Aside from his curious myopia around issues of race, Alterman makes a sound argument for a more nuanced assessment of Obama's tenure and a more mature engagement with a decrepit political system in dire need of serious reforms.

*Salim Muwakkil is a senior editor at* In These Times *and host of* The Salim Muwakkil Show *on WVON-AM in Chicago.*

## Theda Skocpol

Eric Alterman is thoughtful and eloquent as he describes progressive disappointments with Obama's first eighteen months in the presidency and probes the huge obstacles to progressive change built into our divided and institutionally cumbersome system of governance. I don't disagree with many specific points he makes. But the bottom line he draws could not be more wrongheaded. Against huge counterwinds, President Obama and his unwieldy party have managed to enact major reforms: they took higher education loans away from bankers and enhanced funding for lower- and middle-income students; they created a regulatory framework that will start to rein in Wall Street financial shenanigans; they have used regulations where legislation was impossible to further workers' rights and prod environmental improvements; and they achieved comprehensive healthcare reforms that are the most far-reaching and economically redistributive social accomplishments since the New Deal.

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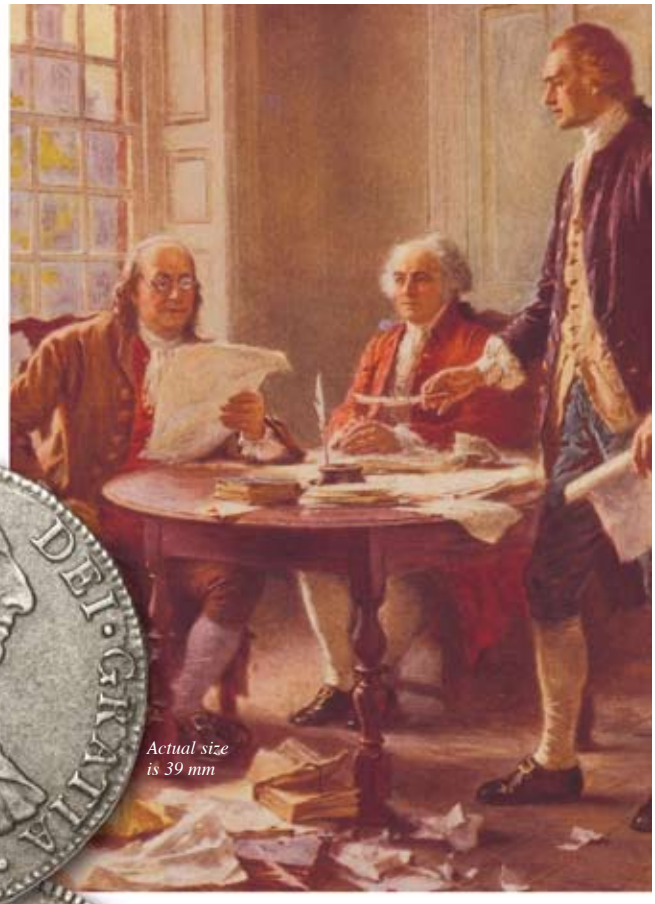

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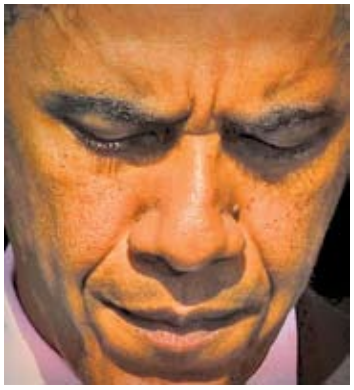
only how the laws passed but what they contain and will mean for Americans and the US economy if they are successfully implemented in the coming years. Like many progressives, I wanted a robust public option. But that possibility was gone even in the legislation that passed the House in 2009—legislation that included an option that would have helped fewer than 5 percent of Americans. What progressive movements achieved instead was political space—to open the door for House liberals to drive better bargains at the end with the Senate and the White House. The Affordable Care legislation that finally passed in 2010 was, as David Leonhardt of the *New York Times* has explained, a major counteraction to the rising inequality of recent decades. The right wing is freaked out about this healthcare reform for good reason: it sets the nation on a more democratically inclusive path and uses government regulations and revenues—real money raised from levies on the well-to-do—to help the less privileged.

The coming elections matter, because if right-wing Republicans triumph, landmark achievements for millions of ordinary Americans can be gutted or rolled back. The last thing progressives should be doing is concentrating on all that has not happened in 2009 and 2010, when a huge, redistributive and profoundly democratic healthcare reform *did* pass—and needs to be defended and implemented. If it can be put into full effect, this reform alone will make a more decent and egalitarian society. The political effects will come when, in due course, younger, less privileged Americans realize what they have gained and vote to defend and extend those gains. That is how progressive change worked with Social Security: it took time to be implemented and modified in progressive ways, and then became a bulwark of our democracy, because less-well-to-do senior citizens vote to defend Social Security.



Since the 1960s, progressives in the United States have often been more interested in racial, gender, foreign policy, cultural and environmental issues, and not so concerned about socioeconomic redistribution. So it is perhaps understandable that for many upper-middle-class progressives, who cluster on the East and West Coasts, the past two years just look like failure. Obama could not get many of their favored policies through Congress, even if he shouted day and night. And the White House certainly had to make choices about what to emphasize in the brief time it likely had to make headway. The administration chose comprehensive healthcare reform and a few other measures with profound economic import—and those will make an enduring difference for millions of ordinary Americans.

The chief Obama failing, in my view, has been economic. His fledgling presidency was upended, in a way, by a financial meltdown—one of many disasters he has inherited from the terrible Bush years. It may have been inevitable that most Americans would conflate the bipartisan, Bush-initiated Wall Street bailouts with the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. And it certainly was Obama's misfortune to take office just as the economy was plunging downward, rather than, as FDR did in 1933, after the economy had reached a nadir of sorts. But I do believe that Obama could have done a bolder and more comprehensible job of explaining to Americans what the government needs to do to create enough jobs in this decade. He did not offer that bold explanation, and now it may be too late.

Obama and the Democrats face tough elections in 2010 and 2012. They should get the support from progressives that they deserve. We should all cheer up, mobilize voters, send checks and write favorable op-eds. If disaster is averted this fall, then it will be time to pressure from the left again.

*Theda Skocpol is Victor S. Thomas Professor of Government and Sociology at Harvard University.*

## Chris Bowers

Eric Alterman has provided us with a useful, if dispiriting, catalog of the myriad forces and roadblocks preventing a more rapid pace of progressive change. Here is a partial list:

§ Undemocratic Senate rules slowing the pace of Senate business and requiring a supermajority for the passage of most bills and nominations;

§ The concentration of progressive organizing efforts within the Democratic leadership rendering the leadership better organized than the independent structures pressuring that leadership. For example, Organizing for America, run out of the DNC, now has an activist e-mail list more than two and a half times the size of MoveOn.org's;

§ A Democratic Party catering largely to the center-right of the party;

§ An administration that actually *is* moderate rather than one that just tells the country it is moderate while surreptitiously governing from the left;

§ A progressive ecosystem that remains divided along lines of ethnicity, class, generation and issues;

§ A system of funding elections that favors large donors, self-funded candidates and unlimited, independent expenditures;

§ The dominance of corporate lobbyists on Capitol Hill and the almost complete absence of progressive advocates;

§ National media that favor conflict and "he said, she said" over substance and fact;

§ Weak Democratic messaging that, in the words of Representative Anthony Weiner, often results in Democrats coming into "knife fights carrying library books."

§ An eagerness to compromise with Republicans that puts Democrats in a poor negotiating position. This is not just a problem among elected Democrats but within the rank and file of the party, too. A Pew poll from early 2007 found that self-identified Democrats preferred candidates who compro-

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mised over candidates who stuck to their positions by a 58 to 34 percent margin. By contrast, self-identified Republicans preferred candidates who stuck to their positions by a 57 to 36 percent margin. With numbers like these, it's no wonder that Democrats often get a quarter of a loaf, or an eighth, when negotiating with Republicans.

As noted above, this is just a partial catalog. But beyond identifying this dizzying and depressing list of problems, what do we do about it? Here are three must-haves:

(1) *Don't give up*. As tempting as it may be to just throw in the towel in frustration, the surest path to further retrenchment of the status quo is to stop fighting it. If the number of people pushing for progressive change shrinks, then there is going to be even less progressive change.

(2) *Don't believe in silver bullets*. None of the problems listed above will solve all progressives woes, in and of themselves. There is no simple key that is going to unlock all of the tumblers at once, no climactic moment of tossing a ring into a volcano. There needs to be broad-based improvement in all areas.

(3) *Deal with fixing Senate rules first*. Of all the problems facing progressives, the struggle to fix Senate rules is going to be resolved first. This is an opportunity for change that will be won or lost by January 3, the first day that the Senate convenes in the 112th Congress. On that day, and on that day only, Democrats have the opportunity to change all Senate rules with only fifty-one votes instead of the typical sixty-seven. The short-term, date-certain time frame on this fight makes it a top priority, perhaps *the* top priority, over the next five months.

This is inevitably going to be a long, hard slog where the primary experience is one of disappointment. It is, after all, tautological for progressives to be disappointed in the status quo and to be striving for levels of democratization and social justice that have never previously been achieved. If we are not disappointed, then we are not progressive.

*Chris Bowers is the managing editor of OpenLeft.com, which he co-founded in 2007. He was an editor at MyDD.com from 2004 through 2007.*

# America: Now and Here

A vast new art exhibition will attempt to reconnect the heartland to our nation's artistic genius.

**by SIMON MAXWELL APTER**

William Blake's poetry, wrote T.S. Eliot in 1920, illustrates "the eternal struggle…of the literary artist against the continuous deterioration of language." And perhaps at no prior time in American history has the nation's language—and the countless connections among citizens that the language forges—felt so profoundly eroded. As E.L. Doctorow writes on page 26, hysteria, spiked with nativism and racism, runs rampant through society, bringing with it a blanket of disenchantment that smothers creativity, innovation and, ultimately, progress.

In the nine years since the September 11 attacks, Americans have indeed seen their public forum become nastier and nastier: hair-trigger antagonism and unease lace the nation's public discourse; and many, from all educational and economic strata, have little faith in the direction the country is heading. "We are in a national crisis," says artist Eric Fischl. "We are totally atomizing our society to protect ourselves from something terrifying." But Fischl sees art as an antidote to the communication breakdown, and he's recruited scores of artists to assist him. "People want to help a wounded nation. They want to contribute, to engage."

Fischl is the curator of "America: Now and Here" (ANH), a vast new art exhibition currently in development and scheduled to launch next summer (americanowandhere.org). Comprising visual art, poetry, film, music and drama—the only "constraint" is that all of the art needs to somehow embody "America"—the project is an attempt to reconnect the nation to its artistic genius, to re-engage society with the creative spark that was once seen as essential to its march of progress. Public figures from Thomas Paine to Thomas Jefferson saw creativity as central to advancement—in 1787, after all, American democracy was a completely innovative way of running a country. At its

© ANDRES SERRANO AND YVON LAMBERT, PARIS/NEW YORK

*America (Jewel-Joy Stevens, America's Little Yankee Miss)*, by Andres Serrano (2002)

*Simon Maxwell Apter is a freelance writer whose work has appeared in the* Virginia Quarterly Review, Lapham's Quarterly, *the* Guardian *and* The American Prospect.

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heart, "America: Now and Here" is a profound exploration and exposition—and exploitation—of American artistry. As Fischl explains, "Creativity is a form of literacy."

Central to this theme is that the nation itself is a creative project, an ideal fostered by the visionary efforts of its hyperliterate citizens. Feeling that America was suffering through an identity crisis that had been catalyzed by 9/11, Fischl conceived the project three years ago. "The country had become off-center," he said, and the common language that had previously informed and benefited generations of Americans had somehow been lost. "I'd have conversations with people I knew about the future of the country," Fischl recalled, "and they quickly became anxious, unsettled and nervous. No one felt confident that we had a future as a society."

ANH will see the so-called kitsch of Jeff Koons's visual art commingle with the contemporary folk music of Rosanne Cash; the poetry of Adrienne Rich with Edward Albee's drama. Movies curated by the Sundance and Tribeca film festivals will be screened at the exhibition and in other local venues. And more than sixty pieces of visual art at each location—think Diane Arbus without the in-your-face bizarreness, Jasper Johns without the winking, get-a-load-of-this irony—will portray America, and Americans, with diverse yet inclusive vibrancy and eclecticism.

One particular ANH poetry project, Crossing State Lines: An American Renga, will feature a dynamic "linked poem" that will follow America's historic frontier westward, time zone by time zone. Created by fifty-four writers, the *renga* opens with Robert Pinsky's East Coast musings:

> Beginning of October, maples
> kindle in the East, linked
> to fire season in the West by what?
> Three time zones, oceans of prairies. Rocky
> precincts. Air, turbulence, icemelt. Ozone ranges.

It ends with a stanza written by Robert Hass, to be delivered as he looks out over the Pacific Ocean.

"Launching 'America: Now and Here' is itself a work of art," says Dorothy Dunn, director of the project. "It's an entirely new way of celebrating America's creativity within the context of society. Creativity is our edge as a nation, but right now it's buried." Fischl compares the project to NASA's Apollo missions of the 1960s and '70s. "This is a modern version of our moon launch," he said. "We're sending a ship into the interior of our lives, into something we can all participate in. 'America: Now and Here' carries with it an essential message of hope."

The Interstate highway–borne exhibition is both something of a throwback and an entirely new way of bringing art to the nation's interior, and the show's specially designed tractor-trailers serve as appropriate echoes of the wanderlust of America's Airstream days. The exposition also harks back to the Chautauqua and whistle-stop circuits of the early twentieth century—the same format, Dunn points out, as the famed Lincoln-Douglas debates of the 1850s. And debate, dialogue and deliberation are what ANH seeks to promote. Visitors to the exhibition will be presented with a picnic basket filled with different manifestations of America: a Joan Baez audio recording, a Robert Rauschenberg objet d'art, a Philip Glass composition. Sifting through them, decoding them—and, ultimately, integrating them—will be essential to experiencing the exhibition. Ideally, visitors will leave the exhibit with more questions than answers.

Barnstorming through "hub cities," including Washington, Des Moines, Seattle, Memphis, Kansas City and LA, the exhibit will pass through eight regions each year, spending six weeks at each location. Fischl says the semitrailer approach should give people the feeling that the circus is coming to town—a decidedly nonelitist, all-are-welcome piece of imagery. This will be a popular exhibit, after all, one that is attempting to dissolve the perceived walls between the artistic "elite" and the salt-of-the-earth masses. There is an unfair preconception, says Dunn, that "culture" is the unique province of New York and LA, San Francisco and Washington. She points out that, given the enormous costs of launching a play, an art show or a performance in New York, "Middle America" already has some of the most fertile artistic soil in the country, with a latent talent and flair that ANH seeks to cultivate.

'We're sending a ship into the interior of our lives, into something we can all participate in.'
—Eric Fischl, curator

The project is receiving enthusiastic though nonmonetary support from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Kennedy Center and the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities, channeling cultural awareness from the littoral to the heartland. It's an analogue to the Federal Project Number One component of the New Deal's Works Progress Administration, which included such programs as the Federal Writers' Project, the Federal Theatre Project and the Federal Art Project. "We're WPA without the 'A,'" explains Dunn, emphasizing that ANH's scope is all the more distinctive for deriving an organic impetus from the energy of regular citizens, not from an executive dictum born in Washington.

To this end, a key component of ANH—and something Dunn and Fischl hope will be part of the exhibit's lasting legacy—is the creation of Artist Corps, a program that will provide students and emerging artists the opportunity to inject themselves, and their towns, into an inclusive artistic community. "We want to position creativity at the core of society, not the margins," explains Dunn. Artist Corps will draw young visionaries from all corners of the country. Though Fischl admits that, unlike Roosevelt's WPA, "America: Now and Here" doesn't explicitly seek to put Americans to work, it should let Americans rediscover the opportunities afforded to them by an artistic heritage that has been subjugated by close-mindedness and fear. "The WPA is a great model of what we're trying to do," he says. The Federal Project Number One introduced millions of Americans to one another

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through music, arts and letters; ideally, ANH will do the same.

A hub city's metropolis will be merely the first stop at each location. In each region, the itinerary calls for two weeks in the city center, one week each in two smaller towns, one week at a state or community college and one week at a military base. The idea is to get people talking about art, to remind Americans that "American" art is as much theirs as it is anyone else's. To Dunn, the exhibit is "aggressively patriotic"; for Fischl, this means willfully expelling the strident nationalism that has passed for patriotism for the past decade and replacing it with something more constructive and positive—in his words, a brand of patriotism that's interesting and fun, strange and fabulous.

Fischl wants "America: Now and Here" to remind people that art can and should work for the populace rather than despite it. "If communities make demands on artists, which is easier than you'd think," he says, "and ask them to be a part of civic life, the artists will agree. If people want it, art can be a central part of their lives." ANH's art is specifically designed to be ecumenical and accessible, a move away from the confrontational, eff-you aggression of the culture wars (though Andres Serrano, the visual artist of *Piss Christ* fame, is a contributor). The exhibit will feature 3,300 square feet of exhibition space, sixteen listening stations, an outdoor screening area for movies and a venue for actors to perform live monologues and scenes by American dramatists.

T.S. Eliot further described William Blake's poetry as maintaining "a peculiar honesty, which, in a world too frightened to be honest, is peculiarly terrifying. It is an honesty against which the whole world conspires, because it is unpleasant." If "America: Now and Here" replaces just a little bit of the nation's disquiet and tension with honesty—even a "peculiar" brand of honesty—it will have served its purpose. ■

AMERICA: NOW AND HERE

# A Calamity of Heart

**by E.L. DOCTOROW**

*This essay, commissioned by "America: Now and Here" curator Eric Fischl, will serve as the introduction to the portfolio of work by the artists participating in the project.*

Artists in America don't usually band together. They are independent entrepreneurs of their imaginations. They create universes of which they are the sole occupants. They may influence one another, they may be bundled by critics as members of an aesthetic movement, but they work alone and think alone, and if they gather on social occasions, like the members of any trade, it is for warmth, for they all know how few of them there are and how unseen by most of the population.

But there are critical moments in our national life when artists do come together as a constituency. In the 1930s, with the country mired in poverty and with the ominous rise of European totalitarian states, artists were necessarily joined by their recognition of political and economic crisis. They disagreed on how to respond—some looked toward the antebellum past, others aligned their spirits with the available varieties of Marxian socialism—but whether doing fervently idealistic murals, machine art, art as political commentary or the art of American loneliness, all of them manifested an enlarged public presence in our national life. What they delivered was a kind of groundsong of a diverse, still vibrantly alive society, proposing by the outpouring of their creative work an underlying freedom, a constitutional identity that was, for all the difficulties of that moment, firm and enduring.

JEANNE MOUTOUSSAMY-ASHE

From the series "Goodbye Comes Before Hello: A Forest of Images," by Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe

So here now today, in a new century, is this assemblage of artists, poets, musicians and playwrights, and we must ask what is the crisis today that impels them, in all their brilliant individuality, to present themselves as a group show?

The fact is that some terrible deep damage to the nation was done in the aftermath of 9/11. The government that swung into action misdirected its response and, with devious arguments to the American people, took us to war. In short time it had adopted the policies of an authoritarian state. Americans found themselves the sponsors of torture, and of the endless impris-

*E.L. Doctorow's most recent novel is* Homer & Langley. *A collection of his short fiction titled* All the Time in the World *will be published next spring. This essay will also be published in* Aperture *No. 200 this fall.*

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onment without trial or counsel of presumed terrorists; they learned well after the fact that they themselves were subject to secret illegal surveillance by their government, and they saw their Constitution disdained with the unilateral abrogation of international treaties such as the Geneva Convention, though such treaties are constitutionally "the supreme Law of the Land." All these measures were claimed as wartime expedients and promoted with a propaganda of fear. At the same time, the scientific evidence of global warming was ignored, religious literalism was put in the way of medical advance, regulatory agencies were given over to the very industries they were to regulate and, rife with wartime corruption, this government left to wallow an American population severely alienated by gross economic inequalities, the forces of wealth thriving at the expense of the middle class and the shrill demagogues of right-wing radio and television shouting down all principled disagreement with what was happening. The resulting trauma to the American people's sense of themselves and their country is still being felt. We have not wanted to believe that a sitting president and his advisers could have so given themselves to an agenda of social, economic and environmental deconstruction, and with such relentless violations of constitutional law as to render themselves, definably, as subversives.

The artists, poets, musicians are gathered here in the presumption that a politics of self-correction may not be enough to heal us, to recover us from our spiritual disarray. There is a lingering miasma of otherworldly weirdness hanging over this country, the aftereffect of both the foreign terrorist attack on our land and the domestic political attack on our constitutional identity. A significant percentage of our population is given to hysteria of one sort or another. A meanspirited despair, a concoction of populism, nativism and racism, still disrupts and denigrates the political discourse. At the same time, our politicians are unable or unwilling to budge the seemingly unmovable structures of corporate wealth that hold in check our national priorities. The top-down flow of ideas and information still configures our debate, still organizes the issues for our edification, and the habitual weekend retreats of media and telecommunications moguls attest to their righteous intent to own the screens of cyberspace as they do the airways, the TV channels and the telephone frequencies. All of this together would seem to define a national identity crisis, a terribly weakened sense of ourselves as a proud citizenry in charge of our lives—a calamity of heart as bad as what America suffered in the Great Depression.

Under these circumstances, our art, literature and music, all of which comes up from the bottom, uncensored, unfiltered, unrequested—the artists of whatever medium always coming out of nowhere—does tell us that something is firm and enduring after all in a country given to free imaginative expression that few cultures in the world can tolerate. Wildly different and individualistic in their political persuasions as well as their art, the artists, writers and performers here collected offer us the aroused witness, the manifold reportage, the expressive freedom, the groundsong for our time of a diverse, still vibrantly alive society, that for all the difficulties of this moment would restore us to ourselves, awaken our stunned senses to the public interest that is our interest, and vindicate the genius of the humanist sacred constitutional text that embraces us all. ■

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# Rotten Apples, Core Values

Profits are booming, but Mott's is demanding benefit cuts. Workers are fighting back.

**by ARI PAUL**

*Williamson, New York*

Dan Yates is one of a half-dozen people in North America who cook Mott's Original Apple Sauce. And in twenty-two years of service to the company, he never thought he'd be on a picket line. Braving the July heat, Yates stood in the shade by his pickup truck outside the plant in this town near Rochester, which, along with being the continent's exclusive maker of the brand's flagship product, also processes juices and drink mixers. A large-framed man sporting a Harley-Davidson T-shirt, Yates, like the nearly 300 workers on strike, is proud of his job but had no other choice but to walk out.

HARRY PINCUS

"As far as I'm concerned, they were personally attacking me," he said, recalling his decision to vote in favor of the strike in May, when the company demanded major union givebacks. "I knew I had everybody behind me, and we're all in it together."

The members of the one-shop Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) Local 220, which had never engaged in any type of militant action, began their strike with the belief that they were dealing with a company—the Dr Pepper Snapple Group, or DPS—that, despite posting whopping profits, was attempting to gut their benefits to enrich its executives even further. But in a country where private-sector union membership has hit historic lows and strikes have become rare, the picketers here in western New York say it's not just their jobs that are on the line. If DPS can get away with this, they believe, all other blue-collar workers in the middle class will be sitting ducks for what the strikers call "corporate greed."

Until 2008, Mott's was owned by Cadbury Schweppes, and as workers explained, there had been a family atmosphere at the plant for decades. Management gave workers hams at Easter and held an annual Christmas party. If workers exceeded production goals, managers organized hot dog roasts as a reward. And the union and management had an active work-safety committee. Local 220 secured pay increases in good times and made concessions when the company was in a crunch, veteran workers said.

Then Cadbury spun off the Plano, Texas–based Dr Pepper Snapple Group, which took the Mott's brand with it. From then on, everything changed at the Williamson facility. No more company parties, and safety committee meetings ended. Managers over-enforced work rules to the point of absurdity; one worker who had previously been the union local's president said he was fired for keeping a knife in his locker, even though he needed it during his shift to open boxes.

Then came contract talks this past February, and the company's opening proposal came as a shock. In addition to $3 per hour wage cuts across the board, it called for eliminating the pension for new employees, reducing the employer match on the 401(k) from 5 percent to 4 percent, and instituting a healthcare plan with higher co-pays and premiums. In addition, it would have allowed the company to shift workers through titles and wage scales from day to day. So a senior worker could come to work one day and do his or her regular task, and the next day be assigned to a low-level duty and earn a lower wage. "At that point, I knew it would be bad," recalled Local 220 president Mike LeBerth, a lead production technician.

Throughout the twenty-two bargaining sessions, the company made its intentions clear. At no point did its representatives say the company was in trouble and needed to cut operational costs to survive. Far from it—DPS posted a $555 million profit last year. So why was the company driving such a hard bargain? The way the union's bargaining committee saw it, the company knew unemployment in western New York was high, so it wanted to cash in on the suffering.

"They said that if we can't meet our finances on the contract they're offering us, then we need to sell our houses," said label operator and union bargaining committee member Bruce Beal, adding that a company official said that workers needed to think of themselves as commodities, like "soybeans or oil," and that as supply rises, the price goes down.

The company held firm on its proposal until days before the April 15 expiration date of the contract, when DPS said that if the union accepted new terms by the expiration date, it would cut benefits but leave wages untouched. If the union didn't, the company would declare an impasse and implement a wage reduction of $1.50 per hour.

The union didn't accept the offer, voting overwhelmingly to authorize a strike if no agreement could be reached. DPS then made one final pitch: if the union changed *its* proposal to a wage freeze and benefit cuts for the three-year contract, DPS would settle because it would have shifted the blame for the diminished contract onto the union. Local 220 walked out, and after its last offer—leaving benefits untouched but accepting a three-year wage freeze, plus a signing bonus—was rejected by DPS on May 21, the union began its strike at 6 AM on May 23.

DPS's intransigence stands in sharp contrast to other employers who have encountered labor tension. Recent studies

*Ari Paul is a New York City–based journalist who covers labor and human rights. He has written for* The American Prospect, Z Magazine, City Limits *and many other publications.*

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show that more employers, public and private, are opting for pay cuts over more benign furloughs; but usually an employer comes to the union, claims rising and unsustainable operational costs, and argues that if the union doesn't bite the bullet and make cuts, the company will have to downsize. LeBerth argued that Local 220 members would have accepted cuts if the company's survival was on the line.

"We can understand if the company needs it, we're willing to give concessions," he said. "But when a company's making money hand over fist, their CEOs are getting huge increases in wages, getting all kind of bonuses, should the people who are actually making the products—who make the money—take all the cuts and get stomped on?"

In a statement, DPS said, "The union contends that a profitable company shouldn't seek concessions from its workers. This argument ignores the fact that, as a public company, Dr Pepper Snapple Group has a fiduciary responsibility to operate in the best interests of all of its constituents, recognizing that a profitable business attracts investment, generates jobs and builds communities."

The company's claim is that the average wage for Mott's workers—$21 per hour—is high when compared with other jobs in the area. The union counters that the company is not making an "apples to apples" comparison by likening the employees to nonskilled workers in Rochester. RWDSU research shows that workers at food manufacturers in Wayne County, where Williamson is located, earn on average $25 per hour.

But the wage issue is a diversion, workers said, because the union agreed to a wage freeze on the condition that benefits also stayed untouched. It was a reduction in benefits, they said, that would have pushed them out of the middle class. As worker Kevin Young explained, a wage freeze wouldn't have been a huge problem, but because his wife is undergoing a variety of treatments for cancer and an autoimmune disorder, the reduced medical benefits would have made it impossible for him to make ends meet.

For a union that had never been on strike, it seemed that one person was able to band them together into action: Dr Pepper Snapple Group CEO Larry Young. In terms of representing a classist villain, Young has done the workers' job for them. His compensation package for 2009—the year before he demanded a gutting of company benefits—totaled $6.5 million. During the second month of the strike, RWDSU learned from an informant that the CEO was on a hunting trip in New Zealand. While Young insists that workers must downsize their living situations, his wife, Colette, runs an organization called ExecuMate, a support group for the spouses of high-powered executives.

The workers are in fear, but not just for their own livelihoods and the future of the region. Dozens of strikers said that if a profitable company can extract unlivable concessions from workers, it would encourage a new offensive on middle-class workers across the country. "America has just gotten to be where they want us to be like China and come down to these wages, and it's not going to happen," said LeBerth.

Stuart Appelbaum, who as RWDSU's international president has been criticized by commercial developers for his efforts to increase wages in New York City's retail industry, concurred. "People have a sense that this has become something bigger than themselves," he said. "This strike in Williamson, New York, has become a paradigm for what is happening in our country." He added, "You see working people living in fear of their jobs and in fear of whether or not they'll be able to keep their homes and how their families are going to survive, and they're being told to sacrifice so that those who have a lot already can get even more."

Unions outside RWDSU—the 1199/Service Employees International Union and the area's Central Labor Council—have contributed to the workers' strike fund. Forklift operator Jon Lefever said the contributions are more than gestures of solidarity. If Local 220 loses, then so will everyone else. "If this profitable company is going to try to stomp us out, who do you think is next?" he asked.

> 'If this profitable company is going to try to stomp us out, who do you think is next?'
> —forklift operator Jon Lefever

So far, about five workers have crossed the picket line and are working in addition to other replacement workers. But production is low. Thirty or fewer delivery trucks come a day; that number is usually more than 100. The company is currently "co-packing," putting a competitor's applesauce into Mott's packaging.

A DPS spokesman said, "The strike is not having a significant impact on our ability to meet the needs of our customers and consumers." But an informant tells the union that on July 31 only 4,033 cases were packed, versus about 120,000 per day prestrike, and other witnesses have claimed that they have seen loads of botched product being thrown away.

Until August, the plant relied on apples from storage, but this year's harvest has just begun, and the growers are nervous. According to Jim Allen, president of the New York Apple Association, more than 20 percent of apples in the state (New York is the second-largest apple-producing state, after Washington) are bought by Mott's, and 160 of the 700 growers sell to the company. "Right now there's tremendous concern that we're going to be in trouble in the fall," Allen said. "If the plant was not to operate, there would be a $100 million loss to the area in a heartbeat."

Allen doesn't take sides in the strike, but others do. Local stores are providing the strikers with food and supplies. New York attorney general and candidate for governor Andrew Cuomo—who has rankled public-sector unions by promising to reduce the state's workforce and by lashing out at state workers' pensions—openly supported the strike, along with other elected officials. The leader of Canada's New Democratic Party, Jack

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Layton, wrote to Young in June voicing food-safety concerns over imports made by scabs.

"Without the experience and training of permanent and long-term employees, we feel that the safety of the products produced at this facility could be compromised with these replacement workers," Layton said, noting that the party's deputy critic for food security and agriculture urged Canada's Food Inspection Agency to scrutinize imports from the Williamson plant.

There is a refreshing sense on this picket line that the workers are defending something that is quintessentially American. These are gun fans, proud military veterans and motorcycle riders who find happiness in a job well done—"salt of the earth" people, as one union official described them, as opposed to anti-establishment radicals. One active picketer explained that he had always been critical of unions like the United Auto Workers, which he thought demanded too much, but he believed DPS was attacking the "work ethic" of Local 220's members.

What this union wants is far from grandiose. Rather, these are Americans for whom Henry Ford–style industry has more or less worked. A company profited handsomely from the hard work of its employees, and in return they could sustain a middle-class income, which they used to shop in the local stores and invest in the rest of the community. In a sense, DPS is warring against an equitable form of capitalism.

Beal, like other picketers, believed that if the union continued to hold the line, Mott's would feel enough financial pain that DPS would be forced to return to the bargaining table, seeing that only a skilled workforce can make the company function. "I think they're finding out how much we're actually worth it," he said.

One three-decade veteran of the plant, who spoke on condition of anonymity, put it more bluntly as he gestured to an empty lot that normally would be full of activity. "If you mess with the bees," he said, "sooner or later you're going to get stung." ■

# Letters

*(continued from page 2)*

be read as a warning: if SEIU—and really, the rest of organized labor—hopes to continue to play a role in these and other popular movements, it absolutely must figure out a way to resolve the existential threat posed by declining density in the private-sector economy. If labor's industrial and economic strength continues to diminish in relation to corporate power, so too will whatever remains of the movement's political capital, as we already saw in the legislative battles over the doomed Employee Free Choice Act and, to a lesser extent, the healthcare overhaul.

As I argue in my article, SEIU came no closer to resolving this basic challenge under Andy Stern's leadership, despite the 1.2 million new members that Hudson cites. And in some cases, the more misguided and counterproductive strategies Stern embraced during his tenure set the union in the wrong direction. If Gerry Hudson and the SEIU executive board are committed to making sure that "all workers who want a voice on the job are able to unite" in a reinvigorated and progressive labor movement, this transitional moment at SEIU must be one of deep and serious self-criticism, reassessment and bold new thinking.

Max Fraser

### Public Workers—the Gold Standard

Amherst, Mass.

I thank Amy Traub for "War on Public Workers" [July 5]. Isn't it remarkable that privatization, deregulation and casino capitalism destroy our economy… and public employees are suddenly to blame? This attack on public employees, their unions and their benefits feels like the final swish down the toilet bowl for the New Deal. Some observations:

(1) Traub notes with disappointment that New York's Democratic gubernatorial candidate Andrew Cuomo has jumped on the bash-public-employees bandwagon; but he's not the only Democrat to do so. Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick has honed the fine art of being seen as a progressive while leading the charge against public workers—reopening contracts and demanding concessions from all state employees, from social workers to librarians to college professors—but not asking for any "shared sacrifice" from the wealthy, and then bragging about it.

(2) Far from being a parasitic drain, public-sector workers provide critical services for everyone—education, public safety, environmental protection—that private enterprise cannot or will not supply.

(3) The public sector sets the standard for quality of employment, and that benchmark serves as a constant reminder of the failure of private corporations to provide adequate compensation and economic security for their workers.

Nowhere is the public benchmark clearer than in the case of pensions, and nowhere has the war been more ferocious. Resentment of public-sector pensions masks the important issue of adequate pensions for all working Americans. There *is* a pension crisis, but it's not the overgenerosity of public-sector pensions. The crisis is that the private pension system is collapsing. Companies that still offer traditional defined-benefit pensions—intended to provide a predictable retirement income for life—have underfunded their accounts. Most companies have ceased to offer pensions altogether or provide meager subsidies to roll the dice in the 401(k) casino. The consequences will be ugly. Many "retirees" will never retire. Or they will have to move in with their children, creating deep stresses, which had been eased by the solid pensions of the Greatest Generation.

Reducing public-sector pensions won't solve that problem. Public- and private-sector workers need to look at each other, recognize friends and demand leveling up, not down. The real problem is not public workers' pensions but private employers reducing their commitment to their workers while increasing executive salaries and stockholder dividends.

Michael Ash
*University of Massachusetts*

Vale, S.D.

I am reminded of John D. Rockefeller's response to striking coal miners at Ludlow, Colorado, in 1913. He got the Colorado National Guard to shoot up the tent village of striking miners. This is an example of the private sector calling on the public sector to help the private sector exploit its workers.

Alvin William Holst

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# Books & the Arts.

## Human Rights in History

**by SAMUEL MOYN**

A mere thirty-three years ago, on January 20, 1977, Jimmy Carter inaugurated his presidency by proclaiming from the Capitol steps, "Because we are free we can never be indifferent to the fate of freedom elsewhere.... Our commitment to human rights must be absolute." Most people had never heard of "human rights." Except for Franklin Delano Roosevelt in a couple of passing references, no president had really mentioned the concept, and it never had gained much traction around the world either. Carter's words sparked an intense debate at every level of government and society, and in political capitals across the Atlantic Ocean, about what it would entail to shape a foreign policy based on the principle of human rights.

The concept of rights, including natural rights, stretches back centuries, and "the rights of man" were a centerpiece of the age of democratic revolution. But those *droits de l'homme et du citoyen* meant something different from today's "human rights." For most of modern history, rights have been part and parcel of battles over the meanings and entitlements of citizenship, and therefore have been dependent on national borders for their pursuit, achievement and protection. In the beginning, they were typically invoked by a people to found a nation-state of their own, not to police someone else's. They were a justification for state sovereignty, not a source of appeal to some authority—like international law—outside and above it.

In the United States, rights were also invoked to defend property, not simply to defend women, blacks and workers against discrimination and second-class citizenship. The New Deal assault on laissez-faire required an unstinting re-examination of the idea of natural rights, which had been closely associated with freedom of contract since the nineteenth century and routinely defended by the Supreme Court. By the 1970s, rights as a slogan for democratic revolution seemed less pressing, and few remembered the natural rights of property and contract that the New Deal had once been forced to challenge. Carter was free to invoke the concept of rights for purposes it had never before served. (Arthur Schlesinger Jr. once called on future historians to "trace the internal discussions… that culminated in the striking words of the inaugural address." No one, however, yet knows exactly how they got there.)

AP

President Jimmy Carter delivers his inaugural address, January 20, 1977.

It looks like Carter was an exception in another sense. He inaugurated the era of human rights in this country, but now it seems to be fading. Bill Clinton dabbled in human rights while outlining a new post–cold war foreign policy, but the Democratic politician now in the White House has spurned them. Few developments seem more surprising than the fact that Barack Obama rarely mentions human rights, especially since past enthusiasts for them like Samantha Power and Anne-Marie Slaughter have major roles in his foreign policy shop. Obama has given no major speech on the subject and has subordinated the concerns associated with human rights, such as taking absolute moral stands against abusive dictators, to a wider range of pragmatic foreign policy imperatives. As his Nobel remarks made plain, Obama is a "Christian realist" inclined to treat human sin, not human rights, as the point of departure for thinking about America's relation to the world's many injustices and horrors.

The rise and fall of human rights as an inspirational concept may seem shocking, but perhaps it is less so on second glance. Ever since Carter put human rights on the table, Republican presidents have found uses for them too, typically by linking them to "democracy promotion" abroad. There is no denying the powerful growth of nongovernmental organizations in the United States

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and around the world that has occurred since slightly before Carter's time, and impressively ever since. But George W. Bush, placing himself in an almost equally longstanding tradition, invoked human rights as the battle cry for the neoconservative vision of transforming the Middle East and beyond—at the point of a gun, if necessary—perhaps sullying them beyond recuperation. Obama seems to think so. If their current abeyance is surprising, perhaps it's because of a historical mistake: the belief that human rights were deeply ingrained in American visions of the globe in the first place.

But what about the 1940s, when FDR essentially coined the phrase "human rights" and set in motion a series of events that culminated in the United Nations–sponsored Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948? Beginning in the 1990s, when human rights acquired a literally millennial appeal in the public discourse of the West during outbreaks of ethnic cleansing in Southeastern Europe and beyond, it became tempting to treat 1948 as a moment of annunciation, with large political consequences. Carter, and the 1970s, were rarely mentioned. It became common to assume that, ever since their birth in a moment of postgenocidal revulsion and wisdom, human rights had become embedded slowly but steadily in humane consciousness in what amounted to a revolution of moral life. In a euphoric mood, high-profile observers like Michael Ignatieff believed that secure moral guidance, born of incontestable shock about the Holocaust, was on the verge of displacing self-interest and power as the foundation of international relations. In Samantha Power's *"A Problem From Hell": America and the Age of Genocide* (2002), Raphael Lemkin, who crafted the draft resolution of the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, was dusted off as a human rights sage and hero, with Carter earning attention only for failing to intervene against Pol Pot's atrocities.

In fact, when "human rights" entered the English language in the 1940s, it happened unceremoniously, even accidentally. Human rights began as a very minor part of a hopeful alternative vision to set against Adolf Hitler's vicious and tyrannical new order. In the heat of battle and shortly thereafter, a vision of postwar collective life in which personal freedoms would coalesce with more widely circulating promises of some sort of social democracy provided the main reason to fight the war.

It's important to enumerate what human rights, in the 1940s, were not. Ignatieff was wrong. They were not a response to the Holocaust, and not focused on the prevention of catastrophic slaughter. Though closely associated with the better life of social democracy, only rarely did they imply a departure from the persistent framework of nation-states that would have to provide it.

Above all, human rights were not even an especially prominent idea. Unlike later, they were restricted to international organization, in the form of the new United Nations. They didn't take hold in popular language and they inspired no popular movement. Whether as one way to express the principles of Western postwar societies or even as an aspiration to transcend the nation-state, the concept of human rights never percolated publicly or globally during the 1940s with the fervor it would have in the '70s and the '90s, including during negotiations over the Universal Declaration.

## When 'human rights' entered the English language in the 1940s, it did so accidentally.

What if the 1940s were cut loose from the widespread myth that they were a dry run for the post–cold war world, in which human rights began to afford a glimpse of the rule of law above the nation-state? What if the history of human rights in the 1940s were written with later events given proper credit and a radically different set of causes for the current meaning and centrality of human rights recaptured? The central conclusion could only be that, however tempting, it is misleading to describe World War II and its aftermath as the essential source of human rights as they are now understood.

From a global perspective, the brief career of human rights in the 1940s is the story of how the Allied nations elevated language about human rights as they reneged on the earlier wartime promise—made in the 1941 Atlantic Charter—of the self-determination of peoples. Global self-determination would have spelled the end of empire, but by war's end the Allies had come around to Winston Churchill's clarification that this promise applied only to Hitler's empire, not empire in general (and certainly not Churchill's). The Atlantic Charter set the world on fire, but because similar language was dropped from the Universal Declaration, human rights fell on deaf ears. It is not hard to understand why. Human rights turned out to be a substitute for what many around the world wanted: a collective entitlement to self-determination. To the extent they noticed the rhetoric of human rights at all, the subjects of empire were not wrong to view it as a consolation prize.

But even when it comes to the Anglo-American, continental European and second-tier states where human rights had at least some minor publicity, the origins of the concept need to be treated within a narrative explaining not their annunciation but their general marginality throughout the mid- to late 1940s. In the beginning, as a vague synonym for some sort of social democracy, human rights failed to address the genuinely pressing question of *which kind* of social democracy to bring about. Should it be a version of welfarist capitalism or a full-blown socialism? A moral language announcing standards above politics offered little at a moment in world history of decisive political choice. By 1947–48 and the crystallization of the cold war, the West had succeeded in capturing the language of human rights for its crusade against the Soviet Union; the language's main advocates ended up being conservatives on the European continent. Having been too vague to figure in debates about what sort of social democracy to bring about in the mid-1940s, human rights proved soon after to be just another way of arguing for one side in the cold war struggle. Never at any point were they primarily understood as breaking fundamentally with the world of states that the United Nations brought together.

In considering the origins and peripheral existence of the concept of human rights, the focus should be on the formation of the United Nations, since until not long before Carter's declaration human rights were a project of UN machinery only, along with regionalist initiatives, and had no independent meaning. Yet the founding of the United Nations, and the forging of its Universal Declaration, actually presents a very different story line from the one that actors in the drama of human rights in the 1990s would have us believe.

Recall that FDR had to be cajoled into accepting the idea of an international organization. In the Dumbarton Oaks documents, the startling outlines of a prospective international organization for the postwar era discussed by the Allies in 1944, it was clear

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that the wartime rhetoric that sometimes included the new phrase "human rights" masked the agendas of great-power realism. And the campaign by various individuals and groups up to and during the epoch-making San Francisco conference on the United Nations in mid-1945 to alter this tactic failed spectacularly, despite the symbolic concession of the reintroduction of the concept of human rights into the charter written there. The victorious wartime alliance had been enshrined as the security council of the new world government, as its seat of true authority, and while some minor states and private citizens attempted to resist a UN that would simply entrench and balance the power of the war's victors, they did not succeed.

If a heroic view of human rights is familiar, it is because of two common but untenable ways of remembering the period. The first is to overstate—often drastically—the goals and effects of the campaign against the Dumbarton Oaks settlement. The second is to isolate the path toward the Universal Declaration as a road still traveled, even if the cold war temporarily erected a barrier on it. But instead of a rousing story of how the document emerged against all odds, one needs to tell an unflattering story about why no one cared about it for decades. As an early NGO chief, Moses Moskowitz, aptly observed later, the truth is that human rights "died in the process of being born." Why they were born again for our time is therefore the true puzzle.

The United States, which had helped drive the global inflation of wartime hopes, quickly retreated from the language it had helped to introduce, leaving Western Europe alone to cultivate it. Even there—especially there—the real debate in domestic politics was about how to create social freedom within the boundaries of the state. Coming after the announcement of the Truman Doctrine in March 1947, with its call for a decisive choice between two "alternative ways of life," the passage of the Universal Declaration in December 1948 offered the mere pretense of unity at a crossroads for humanity. And already by that point, with most emphasis on the right of conscience, European conservatives had captured the language of human rights by deploying it as a synonym for moral community that secularism (and the Soviets) threatened, while few others learned to speak it.

In any case, "human rights" meant something different in the 1940s. Despite its new international significance, its core meaning remained as compatible with the modern state as the older tradition of the domestic rights of man had been. Both were the background principles of the nations united by them. In this sense, if in few others, "human rights" preserved a memory of the "rights of man and citizen" more than summoning a utopia of supranational governance through law. The inclusion of social and economic rights in the mid-1940s very much mattered: still relevant rights to economic security and social entitlements were prominent and, unlike now, surprisingly consensual. But they were earlier products of citizenship struggles, and have still barely affected the international order.

From another view, however, the postwar moment gave the antique idea of declaring rights an altogether new cast: neither a genuine limitation of prerogative, as in the Anglo-American tradition, nor a statement of first principles, as in the French, the Universal Declaration emerged as an afterthought to the fundamentals of world government it did nothing to affect. No one registered this fact more clearly than the lone Anglo-American international lawyer still campaigning for human rights in 1948, Hersch Lauterpacht, who denounced the Universal Declaration as a humbling defeat of the ideals it grandly proclaimed.

After the 1970s, and especially after the cold war, it became usual to regard World War II as a campaign for universal justice, with the shock of the discovery of the camps prompting unprecedented commitment to a humane international order. Rather than Moskowitz's story of death in birth, the proclamation of human rights became one of birth after death, especially Jewish death. In the postwar moment, however, across weeks of debate around the Universal Declaration in the UN General Assembly, the genocide of the Jews went unmentioned, despite the frequent invocation of other dimensions of Nazi barbarity to justify specific items for protection, or to describe the consequences of leaving human dignity without defense.

The more recent phenomenon of Holocaust memory has also encouraged a mystified understanding of the Nuremberg trials, which in reality contributed to the ignorance of the specific plight of the Jews in the recent war rather than establishing a morally familiar tradition of responding to mass atrocity. The Allies coined the new penal concept of "crimes against humanity" in the days between Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as they struggled with how to treat the defeated enemy elites. But on the rare occasion the notion referred to the Jewish tragedy, it got short shrift at Nuremberg, at a time when the West knew little and cared less about the Holocaust, and the Soviets wanted patriotic and antifascist victims rather than Jewish ones.

The concept of human rights was not prominently invoked in the proceedings. It is not at all obvious that, at the time, Nuremberg and related legal innovations like the genocide convention were conceived as part of the same enterprise as the itemization of human rights, let alone falling under their umbrella—though they are now often inaccurately described as if they were a single, though multifaceted, achievement. Lemkin, the main force behind the genocide convention, understood his campaign to be at odds with the UN's human rights project. In any case, Lemkin's project was even more marginal and peripheral in the public imagination than the Universal Declaration, passed by the General Assembly the day after the passage of the genocide resolution.

If there is a pressing reason to return to the history of human rights in the 1940s, it is not because of their importance at the time. The Universal Declaration was less the annunciation of a new age than a funeral wreath laid on the grave of wartime hopes. The world looked up for a moment. Then it returned to the postwar agendas that had crystallized at the same time that the United Nations emerged. A better way to think about human rights in the 1940s is to come to grips with why they had no function to play then, compared with the ideological circumstances three decades later, when they made their true breakthrough.

During that interval, two global cold war visions separated the United States and the Soviet Union, and the European continent they were splitting between themselves. The struggle for the decolonization of empire—movements for the very self-determination that had been scuttled as human rights rose—made the cold war competition global, even if some new states strove to find an exit from its rivalry to chart their own course. Whereas the American side dropped human rights, both the Soviet Union and anticolonialist forces were more committed to collective ideals of emancipation like communism and nationalism as the path into the future. They did not cherish individual rights directly, to say nothing of their enshrinement in international law. Utopian ideals were not lacking, but human rights were not one of them.

During the 1960s crisis of superpower order, the domestic consensus in the East and West around the terms of the cold war began to fracture. Without ever dying in the East, the dream of "building socialism" lost its appeal, while in the West the anxieties of the cold war and early worries about its costs

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drove a new generation to depart from the postwar consensus. Yet in the ensuing explosion of dissent, it was not human rights but other utopian visions that prospered. There were calls for community at home to redeem the United States from hollow consumerism; for "socialism with a human face" in the Soviet empire; for further liberation from "neocolonialism" in the third world. At the time, there were next to no nongovernmental organizations that pursued human rights; Amnesty International, a fledgling group, remained practically unknown. From the 1940s on, the few NGOs that did include human rights on their agenda worked invisibly and bureaucratically for them within the UN's framework, but their failure over thirty years to become prominent, let alone effective, confirmed the agonizing fruitlessness of this project. As Moskowitz observed bitterly in the early '70s, the human rights idea had "yet to arouse the curiosity of the intellectual, to stir the imagination of the social and political reformer and to evoke the emotional response of the moralist." He was right.

But within one decade, human rights would begin to be invoked across the developed world and by many more ordinary people than ever before. Instead of implying what they had come to mean at the United Nations by the 1960s—further colonial liberation—human rights were used by new forces on the ground, like NGOs, and most often meant individual protection against the state and by some authority above it. Amnesty International became visible and, as a beacon of new ideals, won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1977—in America, Carter's year—for its work. The popularity of its mode of advocacy forever transformed the basis for agitating for humane causes, and spawned a brand and age of internationalist citizen engagement.

At the same time, Westerners left the dream of revolution behind, both for themselves and for the third world they had once ruled, and adopted other tactics, envisioning an international law of human rights as the steward of utopian norms and the mechanism of their fulfillment. Even politicians, Carter towering over them all, started to invoke human rights as the guiding rationale of the foreign policy of states; for Americans, it was a moment of recovery from Henry Kissinger's evil as well as the foreign policy, hatched by Democrats before Kissinger took power, that had led to the Vietnam disaster. After Amnesty won a Nobel Prize, other NGOs began to sprout: Helsinki Watch—now Human Rights Watch—emerged the next year.

Most visible of all, the public relevance of human rights skyrocketed, as measured by the simple presence of the phrase in the newspaper, ushering in the recent supremacy of the notion compared with other schemes of freedom and equality. In 1977 the *New York Times* featured the phrase "human rights" five times more frequently than in any prior year. The moral world had changed. "People think of history in the long term," Philip Roth says in one of his novels, "but history, in fact, is a very sudden thing." Never has this been truer than when it comes to the history of human rights.

But how to explain the recent origins of what now looks like a short-lived faith? The designation of the 1940s as the era when contemporary global commitments were born is one version of a larger mistake. The roots of contemporary human rights are not to be found where pundits and professors have longed to find them: neither in Greek philosophy nor monotheistic religion, neither in European natural law nor early modern revolutions, neither in horror against American slavery nor Hitler's Jew-killing. The temptation to ransack the past for such "sources" says far more about our own time than about the thirty years after World War II, during which human rights were stillborn and then somehow resurrected.

Human rights came to the world in a sort of gestalt switch: a cause that had once lacked partisans suddenly attracted them in droves. While accident played a role in this transformation, as it does in all human events, what mattered most was the collapse of universalistic schemes and the construction of human rights as a persuasive "moral" alternative to them. These prior universalistic schemes promised a free way of life but led to bloody morass, or offered emancipation from capital and empire but were now felt to be dark tragedies rather than bright hopes. They were the first candidates for replacing the failed premises of the early postwar order, but they failed too. In this atmosphere, an internationalism revolving around individual rights surged. Human rights were minimal, individual and fundamentally moral, not maximal, collective and potentially bloody.

Given its role in the 1940s, the United Nations had to be bypassed as human rights' essential institution for them to matter. The emergence of new states through decolonization, earth-shattering in other respects for the organization, changed the meaning of the very concept of human rights but left it globally peripheral. It was, instead, only in the 1970s that a genuine social movement around human rights made its appearance, seizing the foreground by transcending government institutions, especially international ones. It, too, emphasized that human rights were a moral alternative to the blind alleys of politics.

To be sure, there were a number of catalysts for the explosion: the search for a European identity outside cold war terms; the reception of Soviet and later Eastern European dissidents by Western politicians, journalists and intellectuals; and the American liberal shift in foreign policy in new, moralized terms, after the Vietnam catastrophe. Equally significant, but more neglected, were the end of formal colonialism and a new view toward the third world. Empire was foreclosed, yet romantic hopes for decolonization were also smashed and the era of "failed states" was opening.

There is a great irony in the emergence of human rights as the last utopia when others failed. The moral claim to transcend politics that led people to ignore human rights in the 1940s proved to be the cause of the revival and survival of human rights three decades later, as "ideology" died. Not surprisingly, it was then that the phrase "human rights" became common parlance. And it is from that recent moment that human rights have come to define the hopes of the present day.

Beyond myth, the true history of human rights matters most of all so that we can confront their prospects today and in the future. A few holdouts aside, progressives have fully adopted human rights into—or even as another phrase for—their politics in the past few decades. And they are correct to do so, since many specific rights, such as principles of equality and well-being, or entitlements to work and education, are those whose content they have defended across modern history. Finally, there is no gainsaying the widespread germination and ambitious agendas of NGOs in the thirty years since human rights came to the world, most of which attempt pressing changes with the most honorable of intentions. All the same, to date human rights have transformed the terrain of idealism more than they have the world itself.

Moreover, human rights have many faces and multiple possible uses. As much as they call for social concern, they anchor property—the principle of rights having been most synonymous with this protection for most of modern history. They were put to use in the name of neoconservative

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"democracy promotion" and have justified liberal warfare and "intervention." They serve as the brand name for diverse schemes of global governance in which vulnerability and inequality persist. Tea Party Express chair Mark Williams recently claimed that his movement "is a Human Rights Movement (by virtue of being based on the greatest expression of Human Rights ever devised by our mortal hand—the United States Constitution)." What may matter is less the idea of human rights than its partisan interpretations and applications, which are inevitable.

If so, why persist in upholding the fiction that human rights name an inviolable consensus everyone shares? Like all universalist projects, human rights are violated every time they are interpreted and transformed into a specific program. Because they promise everything to everyone, they can end up meaning anything to anyone. Human rights have become an ideology—ours—except that, as in the 1940s, it is now difficult to see how the pretense of agreement can help when there is no consensus about how, or even whether, to change the world.

This contemporary dilemma has to be faced squarely; yet history as a celebration of origins will not offer any guidance. To be sure, Obama's "Christian realism" is dubious too, and is no alternative to the human rights mindset of his recent Democratic predecessors. Carter and Obama have been the most assiduous presidential readers of Reinhold Niebuhr. But while Carter found in the Protestant divine the courage to indict national sin, Christian realism too often allows Americans to feel like children of light alone, facing darkness abroad rather than in themselves. Yet Obama's initially surprising caution toward human rights remains useful: it suggests that the faith in the notion may be less deeply rooted than we thought, and not at all necessary. The real question is what to do with the progressive moral energy to which human rights have been tethered in their short career. Is the order of the day to reinvest it or to redirect it?

In his recent manifesto for a reclaimed social democracy, *Ill Fares the Land*, my late colleague Tony Judt stirringly calls for a revival of an unfairly scuttled domestic politics of the common good. Judt argues that if the left, after a long era of market frenzy, has lost the ability to "think the state" and to focus on the ways that "government can play an enhanced role in our lives," that's in part because the ruse of international human rights lured it away. The antipolitics of human rights "misled a generation of young activists into believing that, con-

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ventional avenues of change being hopelessly clogged, they should forsake political organization for single-issue, non-governmental groups unsullied by compromise." They gave up on political tasks, Judt worries, for the satisfying morality of Amnesty International and other human rights groups.

Whether or not this description is correct, the retreat to the state as the forum of imagination and reform is not made any more plausible as a next step. After all, midcentury social democracy had its own global context. And today, as Judt points out, "The democratic failure transcends national boundaries." So it is definitely not a matter of choosing the state against the globe but of deciding how to connect our utopian commitments to make both more just, each goal being the condition of the other. The question remains not whether to have a language and strategy to confront a flawed world beyond our national borders; it is which language and strategy to choose.

One thing is for sure: the lesson of the actual history of human rights is that they are not so much a timeless or ancient inheritance to preserve as a recent invention to remake—or even leave behind—if their program is to be vital and relevant in what is already a very different world than the one into which they exploded. It is up to us whether another utopia should take the place of human rights, just as they emerged on the ruins of prior dreams. ■

COURTESY CRITERION COLLECTION

Maria Lipkina (left) as Tina and Vanda Duarte as Clotilde in *Ossos*

# A Cinema of Refusal

**by AKIVA GOTTLIEB**

Art transcends, but packaging is important. It speaks to the power of Pedro Costa's cinema that I'm willing to admit my mixed feelings about the Criterion Collection's release of the four-disc *Letters From Fontainhas* box set. This smacks of ingratitude, I know. I have no qualms about the 51-year-old Portuguese auteur being elevated to the top shelf with Ozu, Bresson and Tarkovsky, and I can set aside, for a moment, the fact that *Letters From Fontainhas* marks the first DVD release of Costa's work, which has never been screened in the United States outside the festival and retrospective circuit. But for an artist who treats the balance of form and content as a moral imperative, the gorgeous, fully loaded Criterion treatment seems discordant. Walter Benjamin feared that someday the rich would hang bankable portraits of starving children on their walls. Are Costa's stark, rigorous films about the impoverished denizens of Lisbon's Fontainhas district at risk of becoming collector's items?

The box set contains the trilogy *Ossos* (1997), *In Vanda's Room* (2000) and *Colossal Youth* (2006), a series of works inordinately concerned with the conditions of their creation. In the key sequence of *Colossal Youth*, Costa's metaphysical epic, a meticulously composed still-life shot of a table in a tumbledown shack cuts to an extravagantly colorful Rubens painting, seemingly lighted from within, hanging inside Lisbon's Calouste Gulbenkian Museum. Costa is not making a glib distinction between misery and splendor but contrasting two forms of beauty. In the first shot, which takes place about thirty years in the past, the viewer hears the busy soundtrack of the outside world, while the second presents high art (and an image of an even more distant past) in its silent, hermetically sealed safety zone. In the tableaus that follow, Costa presents two characters framed alongside the paintings and furniture of the museum, and they hardly seem out of place. One of them, Ventura, an older man playing a version of himself, recalls when, as a young Cape Verdean immigrant in Lisbon, he worked to construct the walls of this museum. With pride and defiance, Ventura carries himself like an owner, not an intruder. Nevertheless, he is made to exit through the back door.

Doors and walls are the central motif in Costa's work, and the barriers to entry are manifold and varied. I consider myself a hardened viewer of European art cinema, but the first time I tried to watch *Colossal Youth*, I fled the screening after an hour, unable to negotiate the narrative lapses or withstand the film's stasis. The *Guardian*'s Peter Bradshaw called Costa "the Samuel Beckett of world cinema," which seems like a contradiction in terms; but Costa's films plainly do resist the easy grasp, refusing to distinguish between fiction and documentary, artifice and naturalism, splendor and ugliness. (Blessedly, the box set of these films demonstrates Criterion's commitment to his aesthetic by leaving untouched the image pixelation in scenes of extreme darkness.) And yet, rather than Beckett or Warhol, Costa sees himself working in the tradition of the most classical studio auteurs. At the Tokyo Film School in March 2004, he described Chaplin, Griffith, Mizoguchi and Ozu as "the greatest documentary directors, and thus the greatest directors of life, of reality":

> They are the directors who hide things, who close the doors, and you can open them, sometimes. Yet, to open the doors of such films is difficult, dangerous—it's work. Sometimes when we think that we're going to show everything, that we make a documentary to show everything, in fact we don't show anything, we don't see anything; we're just scattered. It's absolutely necessary that you must be outside, not on the screen. Never cry or suffer with the character who suffers on the screen, never.

This strict ethical standard forms the blueprint for a cinema of refusal. Costa shows us the Lisbon museum as well as the hands that built it, but not as a way of explaining that art is built on tragedy; instead, he is asking us to incorporate the art outside the frame of the picture. When Costa first took Ventura to the museum, the older man was as impressed

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with the walls as with the valuable canvases. "He's moved that his walls have Rubens and Rembrandts," Costa said. "But he kept looking behind the paintings." With the release of the Criterion box set, Costa's work has been officially absorbed into the High Art frame, though I trust the precision of its rhetoric will force viewers to reconsider the doors and walls that contextualize its every significant image.

Costa is not exactly in need of a champion. Recently honored with complete retrospectives at London's Tate Modern and Manhattan's Anthology Film Archives, he is, at least among the writers and readers of *Cinema Scope*, *Cahiers du Cinéma* and *Film Comment*, the most widely heralded new filmmaker of the past decade, and the one making the most humanistic and unyielding use of digital gadgetry. But the Criterion release, which enshrines the *Fontainhas* project while also bringing it to a wider audience, is a true test of the paradox that anchors these films: the idea that a cinema of closed doors is the most democratic use of the form imaginable.

In his early years, Costa was on track to become a more conventional kind of great filmmaker. His 1989 debut, *O Sangue* (The Blood), is a swooning black-and-white facsimile of, at various moments, a Nicholas Ray teen romance and a Jacques Tourneur thriller. A simple story of two young brothers reckoning with their absent father's debts, *O Sangue* is a chiaroscuro fever dream; one sequence of young love in bloom, scored to The The's New Wave anthem "This Is the Day," is easily the most romantic in Costa's *oeuvre*. But as *Artforum*'s James Quandt notes, the film "was also something of a false start, in the sense that its dreamy, nocturnal tone, conspicuous cinephilia, and showboating camera work did not establish Costa's true path." This false start would have represented a career achievement for almost anybody else.

Costa's next film, *Casa de Lava* (Down to Earth), from 1994, pays a narrative debt to Tourneur's *I Walked With a Zombie* while establishing its own strange postcolonial cinematic language. Costa claims that the project stemmed from Portugal's absorption into the European Union and subsequent reactionary turn, an ideological shift that led to the privatization of national television and the evaporation of national film funding. Costa collected a small amount of private capital and decamped to a volcanic island in Cape Verde, the archipelago and former Portuguese colony off the coast of Senegal. With a cast of professional actors and island natives, he made an elliptical, deeply mysterious ghost story about a Lisbon nurse who accompanies a comatose, perhaps zombified immigrant laborer on his return home. The nurse, seeking an escape from an oppressive urban environment, finds the island and its inhabitants in a state of purgatory, neither emotionally bound to Portugal nor fiercely independent. "Everyone wants to leave," we are repeatedly told, but the women who anchor the island community seem unmovable. There is enchantment but also confusion, and Costa's technique mirrors the protagonist's dysphoria: his camera takes unambiguous pleasure in the landscape while maintaining emotional distance from the characters.

Arguably, the key drama of *Casa de Lava* occurred off camera. Knowing that the filmmaker was headed back to Europe, Cape Verde residents asked Costa to deliver letters and gifts to friends and relatives living on the outskirts of Lisbon. It was while making these deliveries that Costa discovered Fontainhas, a slum of dark alleys and crowded homes that appealed to him aesthetically, and whose people—most of them Cape Verdean immigrants—disarmed him with their directness and fortitude. His exposure to this dilapidated sector of Lisbon also prompted him to once again re-examine his approach. The philosophically ambitious films of the 101-year-old Manoel de Oliveira, an influential formalist and Portugal's best-known cinematic export, render Lisbon as a cradle of high culture populated by the idle rich. Costa—who, it should be said, looks every bit the highbrow aesthete—wanted to affirm the existence of the dispossessed, and began refining his form to match the starkness of a human struggle seemingly hidden from view.

In *Ossos*, the first film in Costa's *Fontainhas* trilogy, the camera almost never moves. It feels heavy, weighted down, a mechanical analogue to the seemingly narcotized principal characters—played almost entirely by nonactors—who spend a considerable amount of time staring fixedly into space. It helps that Costa, who has the eye of a silent film director, discovered some of the most expressive faces I've ever seen on-screen. Vanda Duarte, the film's lead performer and Costa's subsequent muse, is marked by a kind of soulful self-possession, no matter how haggard her surroundings. The title, translated as "Bones," refers both to the drastically scaled-down manner of production and the emotional strength of the film's women, who look thin but seem unbreakable.

The film also demonstrates a remarkable lack of condescension toward the poor. One character, an unemployed teenage father

Greg Mitchell's
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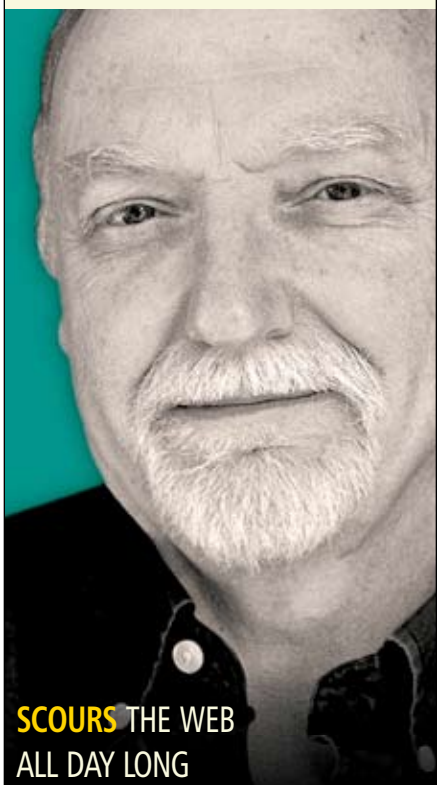

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whose partner has recently given birth, is a singularly pathetic figure. He uses his baby to leverage pity; rarely opens his mouth except to blame others; and acts like a dead weight, literally: in two separate scenes he collapses onto a bed like a blunt, inanimate object. When Costa's camera isn't quietly observing the women in the dark rooms of Fontainhas, it follows this father through the streets of Lisbon as he tries to exchange the baby for cash. He seems beyond help—he feeds the baby milk received as charity, and a few moments later is seen rushing the child to the hospital—but Costa cannot help but grant him a moment of vulnerability. He leaves the baby on a couch in a brothel, walks away and turns back once, quickly, before breaking into a trot and descending the stairs. That quick backward glance is, in Costa's minimalist order, weighted with moral significance. For a split second, the father registers as something other than numb dead weight. Then he moves on.

Shot on 35-millimeter film by Emmanuel Machuel, who worked with Robert Bresson and Maurice Pialat, *Ossos* is a slow, immersive experience. Some of the film's Bressonian flourishes—its focus on fragmented objects, doors, locks and keys—seem predetermined, unafraid to stand nakedly as metaphors. Costa also loads the film with peculiar alienation effects. The two female protagonists are each provided a doppelgänger who hovers on the margins of the story, sometimes offering a comment but mostly watching silently. If we attempt to identify with the central figures, we also have to consider those who, like the audience, are only here to watch. Even so, the vividness of the film's portraits points toward a further refinement of craft. The film ends with a young woman closing a window, as if to say, That's enough; I permit you to come no farther. Pointedly, the clamorous noises of the neighborhood continue playing on the soundtrack as the credits roll. This story isn't over.

Costa considered *Ossos* a dead end. He saw himself and his crew as intruders in a residential community—shining bright lights after dark, exercising power over the powerless. He became fully attentive to the moral considerations of what it means to bring a camera into another person's private sphere. He decided he wasn't done with Fontainhas, even if Lisbon had consigned it to the dust heap, having opted to begin destroying the neighborhood as part of a slum clearance initiative. At the invitation of Vanda Duarte—who asked him, cryptically, to "stop the faking"—Costa took a Panasonic DV camera to Fontainhas; for more than six months, every day and on his own, he collected 180 hours of footage for a kind of performative documentary about the women and men living outside the margins of Portugal's official history. The monastic *In Vanda's Room*—the title is a rebuke to *Ossos*'s closed window—represents Costa's orthodox attempt at what Wallace Stevens called "the poem of pure reality."

Digital video has enabled Michael Mann to become more fleet-footed, David Lynch more esoteric and Aleksandr Sokurov able to pull off at least one monumental stunt. Costa uses it to reduce his footprint to the point where it becomes a constant, invisible presence. Though *In Vanda's Room* is shot with the lightest possible equipment, the camera still does not move. Here Costa operates in a kind of primitive mode where the simplicity of means—one camera, a few mirrors, natural light—facilitates a series of stark visual epiphanies. Costa has called this tendency "reactionary," but the results couldn't feel more radical. American minimalist James Benning has adopted digital technology to stretch his fixed camera shots to an almost interminable length; his recent *Ruhr* features an unbroken sixty-minute take of an industrial coke plant. Costa also tests the power of the extreme long take, but whereas Benning forces the viewer's gaze onto landscapes and industry, in order to invite all manner of theoretical and political questions about the nature of image, Costa challenges the spectator to engage with human beings in claustrophobic settings for uncomfortably long stretches, and they're exactly the types of people we'd cross the street to avoid. In doing so, he has become digital cinema's first material humanist.

With the thuds and groans of wrecking balls and bulldozers dominating the soundtrack, the nearly three hours of *In Vanda's Room* depict the last gasps of a Fontainhas district preparing for dispossession. Opening with a shot of its protagonist inhaling heroin, passing it to her sister, then letting loose her trademark hacking cough, *In Vanda's Room* is the loud and unrelenting cousin to the mannered quiet of *Ossos*. In the earlier film, drug use is carefully elided; in *Vanda* the paraphernalia of self-destruction is omnipresent. Digital video mostly sharpens the oppressiveness of the atmosphere, isolating the flies and insects, and the flatness of the imagery echoes the flatness of the dialogue. Crucially, digital video also allows Costa to shoot in extreme darkness: some scenes are so inadequately lighted that the bright white subtitles seem jarring. (In Costa's films, materiality is always in the way.) It seems strange

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to designate as beautiful an experience this forbidding; but as Cyril Neyrat notes, this is "not a cosmetic beauty but one that is caustic and critical—a beauty that allows us to see, hear, and feel the strengths and weaknesses, the pride and shame, the despair and the life that resists and rises up against destruction and annihilation."

Lacking establishing shots or a bird's-eye view, this remarkable work is very much a representation from within; and the story, such as it is, depends on the whims of Lisbon's municipal wrecking crew. There are robberies, arrests and deaths, but they all happen off-screen. Not entirely unlike the principal characters, we are simply stuck where we are (until where we are ceases to exist). Vanda's room is a kind of public forum where addicts gather to air grievances and boast about their hematomas, but their quotidian banter always pivots on one basic question: do we have agency or not? "This is the life we want, doing drugs," Vanda asserts, with a characteristic lack of self-pity that leads filmmaker Thom Andersen to view the film as Costa's remake of *Rio Bravo*, the classic Howard Hawks western about a ragtag band of misfits standing their ground in a single room to fight off the encroachment of the outside world. (In this comparison, Vanda presumably embodies both John Wayne's gunslinger and Dean Martin's drunkard.) But the paradox of *In Vanda's Room* is that the bulldozers, those machines of destruction, will be a merciful *deus ex machina*. Until their walls are knocked down, Vanda and her peers remain trapped in their own decay. The circular logic of these addicts offers no room for exit; using is unsustainable, but withdrawal sounds even more frightening. Prison is supposed to be rock bottom, but how would it look any different from Fontainhas?

*Colossal Youth* is similarly designed to frustrate easy assumptions about the relationship between the destitute and free will. Also shot on digital video in static long takes, the film follows the relocation of members of Costa's Fontainhas stock company from their ghost town to a comparably pristine public housing complex. Vanda now looks weathered almost to the point of unrecognizability, but she's ditched heroin to take on motherhood and now subsists on a healthier diet of methadone and trash television. When Ventura is taken to his new apartment by a civil servant, we expect him to graciously accept what looks like a rare gift. Instead, he complains about its size and points to a couple of spiders on the bright, sterile white walls. This is the same Ventura, remember, who drapes himself across the Gulbenkian Museum's furniture like a king accustomed to luxury. When confronted with a door that opens and closes without a sound, he looks puzzled; for someone accustomed to the clamor of Fontainhas, silence is immediate cause for suspicion.

In this heavily stylized production, the dazed, unreliable and somehow majestic Ventura has set about finding and gathering his "children"—a collection of grown-up townspeople, Vanda included, who depend in some way on the older man's wisdom. The film's centerpiece is a love letter dictated by Ventura to an illiterate, heartbroken young friend; the letter gets repeated around ten times, gaining, losing, then earning back its totemic significance. If the letter can never be written down, then the recitation must keep the sentiment alive. Part *Odyssey*, part John Ford western, *Colossal Youth* contends that the men and women of Fontainhas are not only worthy of narrative representation but also heroes of a complicated epic history. (The film's Portuguese title translates as "Youth on the March," echoing an old revolutionary slogan, and the plot refers obliquely to Portugal's leftist military coup of April 1974.) Was not Odysseus' saga also one of migration and displacement, passed down as a remembered poem from generation to generation? Ventura, who at the beginning of the film is exiled from his home at knifepoint by his wife, Clotilde, "or a woman who looked just like her," is constantly confusing names and identities, as the albatross of historical memory threatens to slip from around his neck.

*Colossal Youth* is a near-perfect synthesis of Costa's romantic and realist modes. With added confidence in the capabilities of digital video, he manipulates his sources of light so that objects and faces radiate an energy otherwise missing from the landscape. Costa seeks to humanize, to find the monumental in the quotidian, but the more radical gesture is his consciousness of the collateral damage the artist leaves in his wake. Can his answer to irreparable urban decay, to the hardship of women and men who are likely still alive and struggling, really be to ask us to pay $79.95 for a DVD box set? If Beckett spoke to a universal malaise, Costa skirts the boundaries of social anthropology. This particularity is part of the problem. If we thought we could help, we know exactly where these people are. We even know their names. As technology offers novel ways to bring otherwise segregated populations into the same headspace, one wonders just how close you can get and still remain an outsider. Costa has handed the world a slum in a box. He also gives us its beating heart. Which is the heavier burden? ■

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# SHELF LIFE

**by BARRY SCHWABSKY**

**IT'S AN OLD CHESTNUT, BUT ALWAYS** worth pondering: can art be taught? Less often asked but maybe more important is the complementary question: does art have something to teach?

Once, it would have been obvious that art was teachable. Until the nineteenth century, all European artists had either been trained in the atelier of a master or in one of the academies that arose in the late sixteenth century in Italy and spread to France and beyond. But the advent of industrially produced artist's materials and the modernist rebellion against the academies tilted at tradition. Perhaps anyone could be an artist; what makes for art might be something over and above the techniques acquired in any school. But with the postwar transformation of art-making into a university subject, and more recently with the introduction of PhD programs in studio art, the dream that everyone is potentially an artist seems to have receded. Art is a profession whose barriers to entry are getting stricter by degrees.

Yet the re-professionalization of art has raised qualms among art educators, judging by three recent books on the topic. With more than 1,000 pages of essays and interviews reflecting the views of eighty-five contributors, they convey a cacophony of views, but one message rings through clearly: art education faces no greater threat than standardization. For teachers as much as students, art should be an encounter with the unexpected. In her contribution to *Art School (Propositions for the 21st Century)*, edited by Steven Henry Madoff (MIT; $29.95), Clémentine Deliss cites a nineteenth-century educator who "believed that teaching something that one knew nothing about would encourage the student to use his or her own intelligence." Thus Luis Camnitzer's insight, in the same book, that "it is preferable to share ignorance with precision than to share knowledge imprecisely."

COURTESY ALEX ZACHARY, NEW YORK

*Rotterdam, 4/16/2009*, from the "Seminars/Lectures" series by Rainer Ganahl

**READING CAMNITZER'S OPINIONATED** résumé of the history of art education in Latin America, one feels he must be a good teacher. But I'd give the classes of some of the other contributors to *Art School* a wide berth. Why? In an interview in *Ch-ch-ch-changes: Artists Talk About Teaching* (Ridinghouse; $35), a collection of interviews by John Reardon, the German artist Thomas Bayrle explains, "I want to be political but not ideological." Well, too many of the contributors to *Art School* (and a few of those to *Ch-ch-ch-changes*) are ideological without being properly political (which is to say, enlightened). Reading between the lines, we see that their endlessly proclaimed openness to exploration begins to sound like a desire to mold the student in their own image by stealth. Reardon gets it just right: "It goes something like…we're open to everything here, but we're very particular about what it is."

But perhaps the paradox Reardon is alluding to is inherent in contemporary art; after all, we accept that in principle anything can be art, but we are still, as he says, very particular about what it is. Liam Gillick speaks of a "productive intolerance" that allows differences to be put to the test. Perhaps the upshot would be that no one kind of school, no one type of teaching, should be universal. The health of art would depend on different schools advocating very different values. Europeans are worried about where art education is going because the Bologna Process intended to "harmonize" higher education systems across Europe seems threatening to artists. The German system, for instance, revolves around the charismatic figure of the individual artist, for whom the class, as Tobias Rehberger puts it, "is more like a family, or gang, kind of thing." Any but the loosest bureaucratic framework seems completely inimical to it.

**AS DAVE BEECH EXPLAINS IN HIS** contribution to *Curating and the Educational Turn*, edited by Paul O'Neill and Mick Wilson (Open Editions/De Appel Arts Centre; $35), bureaucratization means that "practices that were once run on tradition, superstition, custom, religious code, spiritual inspiration or mysterious forces would be liberated from irrationalisms and anachronisms in a clean sweep kicked off by the Enlightenment." But the consensus of artists who teach (and not only in Germany) seems to be that it is mainly through just these irrationalisms and anachronisms that an idea of art is transmitted. If that's true, then the assumption of most of the book's contributors, many of them curators and academics rather than artists—that the point of artistic education is "to enable students to develop a self-determined, reflexive and critical view of their own position and the role of art in society," in Ute Meta Bauer's words—seems dubious, however desirable it might sound. In fact, as Marion von Osten observes, "this educational turn in contemporary art engenders a rather strange concept of art itself; it somehow reduces art to an instrument—a utility—for generating a 'better society' and, furthermore, this instrumentalization can readily be appropriated by neoliberal governments." But at least there's this hope: just as much of what is most interesting in art emerges from a place that is sheltered from the conscious intentions of those who make it, much of what's most interesting in art education happens at cross-purposes with the explicit aims of those who run it. ■

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FRANCISCO ROMÁN

Dylan Riley Snyder as Timmy and Allison Janney as Trish in *Life During Wartime*

# Pursuit of Happiness

**by STUART KLAWANS**

From Leonardo DiCaprio, speaking in the respectable blockbuster of summer 2010, we learn that no virus multiplies more explosively than an idea; in which case, I'd like to know why the Centers for Disease Control allowed all those people to watch *Inception*. Lax government supervision of Christopher Nolan, whose credit will hereafter be changed in my book from "writer-director" to "primary vector," has allowed a fresh strain of twisted ideational RNA to burrow into the nervous systems of tens of millions of Americans, when they'd already been infected with that characteristic disorder of our time, Wachowski Syndrome.

It was, of course, through the authors of *The Matrix* that the virus became pandemic: the notion that you, hero, should feel free to use the snazziest conceivable arsenal to kill as many people as you like, because they're not real. Those human-shaped objects are just shades of an illusory world to which you owe not the slightest responsibility. In *The Matrix*, this dreamland was controlled by monsters from outer space, from whom Earth had to be liberated. In *Inception*, it is not quite controlled by corporate spies, and the liberation (for DiCaprio) requires the snapping of tentacles that are emotional rather than ickily extraterrestrial. And yet, in either case, the activity within the fantasy realm is exclusively a matter of bang! bang! kaboom!

What is the point of having an imagination, I ask you, if the only thing that can be imagined is mayhem, perpetrated without regard for even the appearance of human life? All that cleverness in *Inception*, with its four parallel lines of narrative that proceed at different but interlocking speeds—like a counterpoint in *The Art of Fugue*! Like the Carter *Double Concerto*! No, actually. Like Hans Zimmer's deeply mediocre score, whose leaden motoric thunks betray the sameness of all the Nolan dreamlands. On every level of *Inception*, they infect us with the identical idea: "Shoot, and never mind what happens to the target."

Our brains seethe with poison worms. Who will cure us?

I nominate Todd Solondz. He does not intend to be therapeutic, God knows (to mention a pervasively absent character in his new film), nor does he deserve to be elevated only at another writer-director's expense. (If I were to get invidious, the proper foil wouldn't be named Nolan, anyway, but Coen.) Yet I was so moved by Solondz's *Life During Wartime*—knocked back into my seat by his characters' pain and foolishness, then carried halfway into the screen by their innocence, their striving, their desire not just to feel better but to be better—that I, too, have tumbled into a hapless fantasy. Wouldn't the world be wonderful if *Inception* were the film left to straggle through a two-week run in the art houses, and *Life During Wartime* got to be the blockbuster?

Moviegoers who are familiar with Solondz's 1998 *Happiness* will immediately recognize the characters and situations in this new film—though I rush to say that prior knowledge is not necessary, and will serve (for those who have it) mostly to confirm that Solondz, grown middle-aged, is no longer tempted to disfigure his work with a too gleeful cruelty. His three incompatible sisters from *Happiness*—one housewifely, one timidly artistic, one consumed by her worldly success—have now left New Jersey for sites of forgetting, in Florida's Jewish belt and the hills above Los Angeles: places where you don't see much that looks like it has a past, and the light and color (in Ed Lachman's cinematography) have the suspect sweetness of a gumdrop. The past lurks anyway, returning in the form of schoolyard rumors, wheedling phantoms and a man who was said to be dead and acts like it.

This latter figure is Bill (Ciáran Hinds): once a practicing psychiatrist and paterfamilias and now a slablike ex-convict, whose crime was to have raped a young boy. As he lumbers from the penitentiary toward Florida, unannounced and heavily quiet (he seldom speaks, and the scenes around him are filled with silence), his sister-in-law Joy (Shirley Henderson) is making the same journey south, to take temporary refuge with the remnants of Bill's family. Young Timmy (the freckled and prodigious-eared Dylan Riley Snyder) is preparing for his bar mitzvah, where he will speak of the example set for him by his father. (He's been told that Dad died in combat, defending us from the terrorists.) Bill's former wife, Trish (Allison Janney)—designated as the normal member of Joy's family, and well medicated to maintain that status—is aflutter with the surprise of new love. She has met a divorced man of mature years (Michael Lerner), himself recently arrived in Florida; and though he's thick-bodied, Punchinello-faced and half a head shorter than her, he seems to her a decent man and a real man, whose slightest touch gets her babbling like a brook. As for Joy—piping, frizzy, high-strung and hopelessly misnamed—she would like to start a new life (having fled from her own version of the impossible husband) but is constantly being accosted by the ghosts of the old.

It's the third sister in the family (Ally Sheedy), self-advertised conqueror of LA, who supplies the title for the film, asking if the little people around her (like Joy) don't know there's a war going on. But it's Joy, with her wan but persistent desire to make the world better somehow, who aligns the film's themes, as a magnetized needle will align iron filings. What if a stricken con-

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science isn't enough to make someone stop doing terrible things? What if people simply can't change what they are—even after they've turned into Joy's ghosts? Yes, there's a war going on, unseen by these characters (though often worried about), and it colors everything; but the real struggles of *Life During Wartime* are happening within, and they're lost, over and over.

Which isn't to say that *Life During Wartime* is a grim movie. It's by Solondz; he knows how to make you laugh, if only by reflex, as when you're goosed in the solar plexus. But beneath the deadpan outrageousness there's outrage, and beneath that there's a profound sorrow, which is now more empathic than in any of his past films. You feel it running through all the performances, but most of all in the fierce ones: by Hinds and the remarkable young Snyder and (in a brief but stunning turn that has to be mentioned) Charlotte Rampling. Here, I think, is where a comparison to *Inception* isn't misguided. Nolan is the kind of filmmaker who figures out his framing and editing and then lets the actors use what time and space he's allotted them; but Solondz starts from the pace and tone he sets with the actors and builds the framing and editing around that.

This used to be called humanistic filmmaking—though given Solondz's views on what humans are, that might not sound very appealing. So let's name this method the Chase: the real chase, not the one that the Nolans cut to. Let's hear it for that damned pursuit of *Happiness*.

After the Israeli tank gunner blasts her apartment, annihilating her husband, her daughter and all that she owns (except for a painting of the Virgin and Child, miraculously left intact on a shattered wall), the Lebanese woman stumbles out of the remains of her building, into the flaming rubble on the street, and begins searching, at once numbly and frantically, for a child she assumes must still exist. The audience watching this scene knows better; and so, too, does the tank gunner, whose telescopic sight provides the only view of the world outside that writer-director Samuel Maoz permits in *Lebanon*. Throughout the course of his film you see either the tank's soldiers, shown in side-lighted close-ups within the murk, or else a variety of strangely depthless images of slaughter, contained within a truncated circle in the center of an otherwise black screen.

These contrasting optics come into confrontation shortly after the desperate mother's dress catches fire. As the scene grinds on horrifically, this woman who already has nothing is stripped bare, left to wander naked and then tossed a blanket to throw over herself. Still, she won't follow the orders of Israeli footsoldiers to stay on the ground. She rises and staggers straight toward the tank, staring directly into its telescopic sight—and this accusatory gaze, encircled in the center of the screen, is intercut with an extreme close-up of the gunner's eye as he watches what you are watching, seeing but not being seen.

From this sample description of *Lebanon*, I hope it will be evident that Maoz's film had both emotional and formal power on its side when it won the top prize at last year's Venice festival. Whether this power is adequate to the subject seems to me a question worth asking, now that *Lebanon* is going into US theatrical release.

To be precise, this is really two questions—one political and the other aesthetic. The first concerns the limitations and biases that one or another viewer might detect in this drama about the 1982 invasion of Lebanon, as experienced by a handful of Israeli soldiers over the course of a little more than twenty-four hours. The second question might seem to be less pressing, being merely artistic; but to my mind it takes precedence, since it asks why a movie would be worth mulling over in the first place.

When I say that *Lebanon* has formal power, I mean that it conforms to a classical model of moviemaking, and of interpreting movies, that is exemplified in the works of Alfred Hitchcock and that was codified by his commentators. Set aside, if you can, the statements that Maoz has given about *Lebanon*'s being his own story, wrenched out therapeutically after almost thirty years of suffering. Maybe so; but the fact remains, his cure has been effected through emulations of *Lifeboat* and *Rear Window*.

In *Lebanon*, as in those pictures, certain basic conditions of moviemaking—such as the constraint of the set or the voyeuristic complicity of the director and audience—no longer function unseen and unremarked in the background but are pushed forward into the plot. Nervous excitement over the events on screen becomes entangled with a potentially critical awareness of one's relationship to the spectacle. To Hitchcock's admirers, and to two or three generations of moviegoers who have absorbed their way of thinking (sometimes without knowing it), this production of a dual consciousness is the sign of intellectual and moral seriousness in a movie.

But why would *Lebanon* need such a sign? This is not a yarn about a snoopy, crotchety Jimmy Stewart who thinks he's discovered a crime. It's a semi-autobiographical portrayal of war. As other Israeli writer-directors have shown, it's possible to make such a film with more than therapeutic intent but without recourse to this particular formalism. In *Kippur*, Amos Gitai used an observational, long-take approach that heightened the reality effect of the film by stretching your sense of time and deliberately draining away momentum. In *Waltz With Bashir*, Ari Folman mongrelized animation and documentary, first-person and third-person narration, to produce a consciousness that wasn't so much dual as fractured and kaleidoscopic. But Maoz, relying on an older and more widely accepted model, has sought to guarantee the probity of his movie by bringing out its movieness. He even adds extra layers of cinematic allusion, sometimes shooting the tank's interior as if it were the slimed-up spaceship in an alien horror movie.

So when the political question gets pushed to the front—does Maoz go too easy on the Israelis, too hard or just hard enough?—the answer ultimately doesn't depend on the information in *Lebanon* that's included or omitted, emphasized or glossed over. You can argue about that for as long as op-eds are written. The Hitchcockian form answers the question by sealing your complicity with the semi-autobiographical gunner. *Lebanon* moves you, over the course of ninety-four minutes, from utter shock at the devastation you see through the gunsight to complete identification with, and pity for, the man who was pulling the trigger.

It's a strong film, complex in many ways, and seems to me to come from a genuinely stricken conscience. But in its formal probity, *Lebanon* turns into a moral dodge. ■

## After Sappho (The Volcano)

The clouds mock me with their mimicry
of continental land-masses. Chimerae.

An atmospheric shield of tiny silicates
separates the mother from her sons,
roses from wholesalers.

ANGE MLINKO

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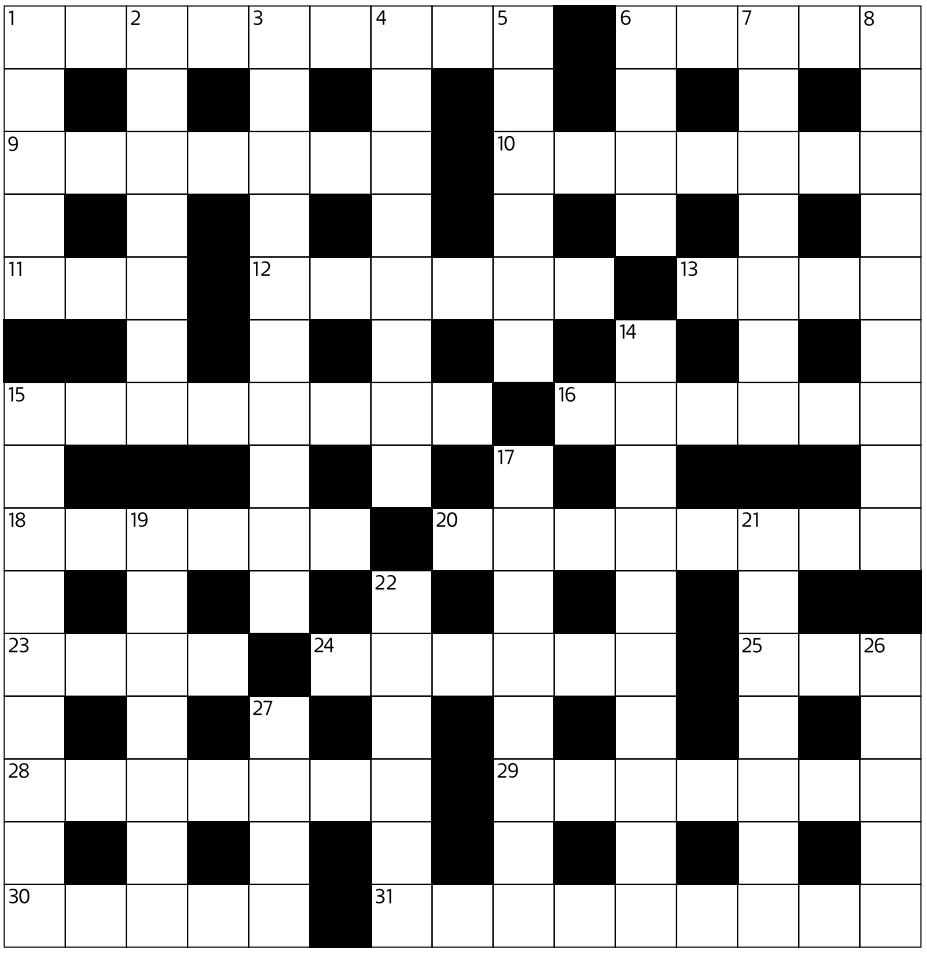
# Puzzle No. 1597

FRANK W. LEWIS



## ACROSS

**1** Sailor-neighbors of Chaucer's wife? One might consider them tubby. (4,5)

**6** Like a porch philosopher? (5)

**9** Such a fever with typhoid! (7)

**10** See 15 across

**11** See 30 across

**12** Working on an essay, thereby causing some strain. (6)

**13** Safe isn't with one, perhaps. (Especially breakfast food, after the first of the year.) (4)

**15** and **10** Some cut, for example, made by an actor. (6,2,7)

**16** Low Shakespearean comedian? (6)

**18** To withstand broken rest is what a movement may want to do. (6)

**20** Traditionally demands representation. (You might consider it not a bad sort around a tool.) (8)

**23, 25** and **28** Sound the bugle with what might suggest taps, but don't do it consistently. (4,3,3,4)

**24** One who shares a place in the sun with John Bull? (3,3)

**25** and **28** See 23

**29** Pompously mouthed. (7)

**30** and **11** across Relative to a buck, you might make something out of it. (8)

**31** Southey and his friends keep a lost cause for them. (4,5)

## DOWN

**1** Descriptive of the house of Boz. (5)

**2** She fell for 16 across. (7)

**3** Sort of treats the main point like a good tactician. (10)

**4** Rover, perhaps, is fortunate to be so. (5,3)

**5** and **17** down Certainly not the first technical manual, though it still might be a first edition. (10,4)

**6** You can see through what it holds for the band. (4)

**7** There might be no let-up here, though it makes a poor antonym. (7)

**8** Not included in the lay of the land. (9)

**14** Such an organization makes its voice heard. (5,5)

**15** Box material may be one of the things in hand with directors. (9)

**17** See 5 down

**19** Change of speed on foot. (7)

**21** Kept in firm environment. (2-5)

**22** Musician who sounds somewhat of a crank. (6)

**26** They're reputedly not waiters that come in and go out. (5)

**27** Bulldozes animals? (4)

This puzzle originally appeared in the September 6, 1975, issue.

## SOLUTION TO PUZZLE NO. 1596

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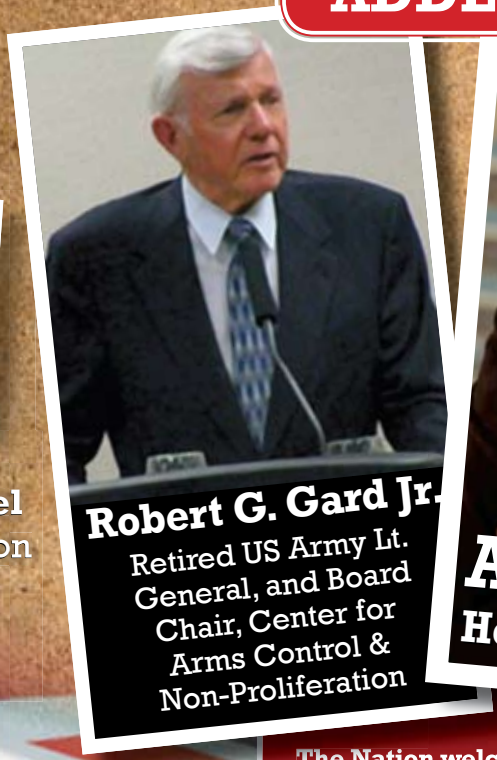

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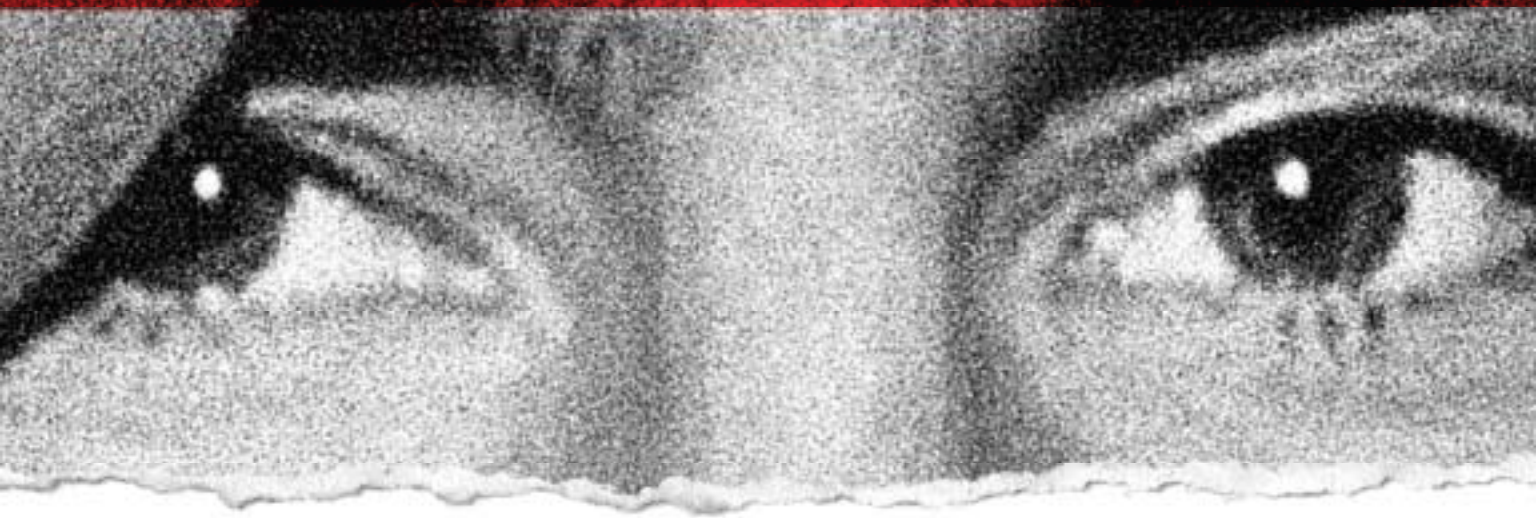

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